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CAPTAIN HIRAM STRONG THE ARM DETECTIVE



OR,

THE LAST of the NINE.

A Romance of the Black Tie.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN COLDGRIP" NOVELS,
"HERCULES GOLDSBUR," "SUNSHINE SAM,"
"SOL SPHINX," "DUDE DESPERADO,"
"GIDEON GRIP," "SILVER STEVE,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE SHADOW OF THE PAST.

"I DON'T see him yet."

"He may not come in his own garments, for you know it would be dangerous for him to do so. Look again and if you see him on the street let me know and I will proceed to make myself scarce."

"I'll do that very thing, Feathers."

It was a small dingy room in the upper story of a tenement-house in a certain district of New

CAPTAIN HIRAM, SEIZING THE LAMP FROM THE TABLE, LEANED OVER THE SILENT MAN TO READ THE MESSAGE ON THE WALL.

York City, and the occupants were two men, one of whom was well known to the police.

This person was the second speaker and he reclined on a poor settee and eyed his companion like a hawk.

He was perhaps fifty, with a strong face and an iron-gray beard of three weeks' growth.

There was something about him, not just repulsive, but it was enough to cause those who saw him for the first time to turn and look at him again.

He had but one eye, and where the other should have been was a scar which seemed to droop over it.

Feathers, as he was called, was one of the well-known crooks of New York. He had intimate acquaintance with the inside of nearly every cell in the city prisons and had passed, on several occasions, the doors of Sing Sing. Still, for all his disreputable life, he had seen honest days, and in another part of the city, at the very hour when he lay on the settee and watched his friend, he had a daughter, the sole reminder of these better days.

The man at the window was a different looking person. He was not so old, and crime had not, as yet, set its accursed impress on form, feature and manner.

He was well dressed, and on the streets might have been mistaken for a dandy, though something about his sinister face would have caused people to shun him.

The two men waited for "the man outside" for some time after the last remark, and when footsteps were heard on the stairs leading to the room, Feathers made himself scarce, as he said he would. The other remained.

Presently the door opened and a man with his hat pulled over his eyes entered.

"I thought you would come," said the one, watching him sharply. "You are a little behind—that's all, but you are here and that settles it."

The new-comer looked like a well-to-do business man. He had a business air, but it was easily seen that he was not at home in that "crib."

"I am here. Now let's proceed to business," was his prompt rejoinder.

Feathers's friend drew a chair up to the table in the middle of the room and unlocked a drawer.

"Do you know that this man is in the city?" he asked.

"The man from Montana?"

"Yes—the dead man."

There was a start on the visitor's part.

"I don't know anything only what you have told me. In fact, I hardly know whether to believe that—"

"There! You know I have never lied to you; and you ought to know, too, that it would not be to my advantage to begin it now."

"That is true."

"Maybe," settling back in his chair and looking at his visitor, "maybe you would like to see this man."

"No, I don't mean that."

"Then we will come to a settlement without further discussion. He is in the city, and, if you are not careful, will be demanding his rights. That would be just like him, you know."

"I suppose so."

"Now, this is the bargain. For five thousand dollars I will agree to see that he never bothers you."

The well-to-do man seemed to gasp.

"You mean to plunder me. It is nothing but robbery pure and simple."

"Just as you say. I am not at all particular. I only stated my proposition. It is for you to accept or reject. I'm sure I am not going to lose any sleep over this thing."

How the speaker watched his victim! From beneath bushy eyebrows a pair of black eyes peered out and seemed to look their target through.

"How long have you been in this business?"

"In what business?"

"Making money this way."

"I don't quite understand you."

"I mean how long have you been doing this sort of work—bleeding people for a little money?"

There was no flush on the other's part—no flashing of the dark eyes. He merely laid one of his dark hands on the table and clinched it there.

"You may think of me just what you like," the other retorted, half savagely. "I don't care what you think. I make my money just as honestly as you have made some of yours and you know it. I am not here to insinuate any charges; I will not make them. God judges between man and man. I hope he will judge between you and me. You know how your money came and I have done you a favor in telling you that the man from Montana is at this moment in New York."

"And you demand five thousand dollars?"

"I ask for that amount."

A hand moved slowly to an inner pocket and a check book was dropped upon the table.

Nothing was said while the pen moved over the pink check, and when it had been torn from the book and shoved toward the person waiting for it, there was a meeting of eyes for a second and a smile passed over the face of the person who had made the demand.

It was robbery "pure and simple" as the giver of the check had called it. It was blackmail of the most villainous character.

In another minute the man who had been robbed was at the door and when he had vanished the face of Feathers looked into the room.

A grin of satisfaction passed between the two men, and when Feathers sprang into the apartment the check was held up to his gaze. He clutched it and ran to the light.

"Is that all?" he exclaimed, looking up with a look of disappointment.

"I didn't like to hit him too hard the first time, you know."

"But he's worth three millions, they say, and here you didn't get a whole drop of blood."

"I know it; but—"

"I wish I had driven the bargain. I would have been able to show a healthy check. You must tap him again and that soon; this won't last me a week."

"It ought to."

"But it won't, I say."

"Then, you must be as ravenous as a wolf."

"I am twice as ravenous. You don't know me. I have dissipated a dozen fortunes. I am Feathers!" and he drew himself up and looked the other in the face.

Meantime he had transferred the check to his pocket and was again addressing his companion.

"Did he bleed easily?"

"Not very. He protested like a good fellow—said it was robbery pure and simple."

"He did, eh? And what about the Man from Montana?"

"He started when I mentioned him as if the subject was not very pleasant. You have a hold on that man, Feathers."

"A hold? I should say so! I know what I'm about and you will see when my treasury gets low I will know how to fill it."

"Don't you think he will inform on us?"

A laugh was the answer.

"That man betray us? I guess not."

"He might—"

"He wouldn't go to the police with this night's work for all he's worth. I would bet Dot's head that he wouldn't."

Meanwhile the man who had been plundered had reached the street and was pushing his way down it. He walked fast, as if anxious to get out of that section of the city; he seemed very anxious to escape observation and when he found himself beyond the precincts of the district, which was really dangerous to well-dressed people after dark, he breathed freer.

An hour later he entered a house in one of the avenues and dropped into a chair.

The light overhead showed him a finely furnished apartment with a thousand and one things to denote wealth. There were books and rich bric-a-brac, objects from all parts of the world, and around him on the walls paintings that must have cost a fortune.

Laban Joyce was at home.

The man who had come to New York five years prior to the date of our story was a three times millionaire. He had made money, hand over fist; everything he touched turned into gold; he was always lucky on the stock market and there were some who wondered by what means he always struck the top wave and kept it until it carried him into the port of fortunes.

He threw his hat to the floor and then discarded the coat he had worn to the meeting in the tenement.

"I know what it all means," he said. "I am in the grasp of a lot of human leeches. I am to be bled whenever they are out of money, and all because—"

He did not proceed, as if a sudden recollection told him that the very walls around him had ears. His face had suddenly become haggard and his eyes seemed to start from their sockets.

"The man I met wasn't at the bottom of to-night's affair," he went on. "There is a hand beneath the surface—an unseen hand. It has pinched me for five thousand and I haven't the courage to set the trail dogs of New York after it. I thought that he was dead. I saw him disappear in the bowels of the earth; and here, because I am told that the Man from Montana is in New York, I draw a check for five thousand and hand it to one of the human vampires who infest this city. Why not break the accursed web at once? Why submit to it? There is Portia, the child for whom I am really living. Of course she knows nothing of the past and she need not know it if I am discreet. Why not?"

He got up and stood, like one undecided, in the middle of the room. Then he looked at his watch and at the hat he had flung to the floor.

"These men keep all hours," he said. "I know one, anyhow—Captain Hiram. He is reliable. Why not go to him? Why be bled all the time by a set of harpies? I know what they say. I know they may expose me and bring forth the Man from Montana, but, I won't stand the bleeding of blackmail! I will defy them all!"

He went out, stopping carefully in the hallway and looking up at the top of the stairs.

A beautiful girl was asleep up above. In one of the rich rooms of the fine residence, dream-

less of the scenes passing round her, slept the Portia of our story—Portia, the child of Laban, the millionaire.

He went out; and again on the streets he flitted away like a ghost, looking back now and then like a guilty person, but when he reached a certain street he seemed satisfied and at last turned up in a hallway where steps led into the interior of the building.

All at once he turned and then fell back, for a figure had entered the hall and was standing where he had stopped.

"Don't go any further!" was said. "If you do you will be in the toils beyond recovery. I want to see you."

"You?" and Laban Joyce leaned toward the speaker and looked with wondering eyes.

He was confronted by a woman whose face was hidden by a black veil, but the moment she threw up a hand and drew it aside the millionaire started, uttering the cry:

"My God! where did you come from?"

"Never mind that. I now am one of the Soft-handed. I know the corridors of the Uncrowned Angel. Come with me!"

Laban Joyce at the very foot of the stairway leading to the office of one of the keenest detectives of New York, turned and went out with the woman.

"I thought she was dead, too—this creature," he said under his breath. "My God! I am truly in the deadly coils!"

CHAPTER II.

THE BLACK TIE.

LABAN JOYCE went with his conductor, speaking very little, but all the time watching her with vigilant eyes. He seemed to think that she had risen from the very stones to confront him at the detective's door.

When they stopped they stood in a room on the second floor of a plain-looking house, and the woman was staring at him as if she had not seen him for years.

"You know me?" she queried.

"I ought to."

"You thought me dead?"

"I did."

"You are very plain. I like that. No, Laban Joyce, as they now call you, I didn't die that night. They bound me to the horse, and when the animal started I gave up for lost. I had a terrible time of it. I was carried over mountain and hill—over river and plain. I saw the skies weep rain on me and the grass shrivel beneath the hoofs of my steed. I never hoped to recover from that terrible ride. But, all that is passed—all but the recollection, which can never be effaced. I am here in New York. I find that you are rich—that everything you have touched has turned to gold. I saw but yesterday your equipage in the Park, and your lovely child, Portia, reclining on the velvet cushions. She is very beautiful; looks some like her mother."

"For Heaven's sake, don't refer to these things!" cried Laban Joyce.

"But, what I say is true. Portia looks like her mother. She has her mother's eyes and her mouth, which was small."

The millionaire stood motionless like a person in agony; his hands were shut and drops of cold perspiration beaded on his forehead.

"When I came back from that terrible ride," continued the woman, "I thought I would quit the accursed country. I found that you were gone. You went off between two days, you remember—selling out your shares in the mines. I found also that a very distinguished citizen of Sundown had disappeared. This was no less a personage than Diamond Duke, or the Man from Montana as we sometimes called him."

Joyce at this dropped into the nearest chair and glanced toward the door.

"It's locked," assured the woman, with a smile. "We will not be disturbed here."

He looked relieved.

"Yes, Diamond Duke had vanished. He was somebody in Sundown. He did not like some people and perhaps you were among the number. I didn't look for him. I did not want to let them know that I had escaped death, so I left the country. I went from camp to camp until, having made a little something, I turned my back on the wild West and its desperadoes and landed in this city, where one-half of the citizens try to devour the other half."

The man seemed to smile at this, but did not speak.

"You were going up-stairs to the den of Captain Hercules. You were going to lay something before him. In other words, you were going to ask him to ferret out the truth."

"What truth?"

"Why, the truth of the statement you heard to-night—that the Man from Montana is in the city."

"Woman, in God's name, who told you this?"

"Never mind that. I say you were going to Hiram Hercules with such a purpose."

"Well?"

"Don't you know that such action would seal your doom?"

"I don't see how."

"You don't, eh?" cried the woman. "You

don't know that the Man from Montana is just as powerful here as ever he was in Sundown?"

"How, powerful?"

"In many ways. You were bled to-night."

Joyce started.

"They bled you for five thousand dollars. They deliberately took from your millions that amount, and that is to be the entering wedge."

"You know who did it, woman!"

"I know a good many things! Listen to me. Some of the old toughs of Sundown are in this city. They have flocked hither like vultures. They knew that you are a millionaire, here under the spires of New York. The old League is here."

"The League of the Black Tie?"

"Yes."

"You told me awhile ago that you belong to the Soft-Handed."

"I do."

She put forward one of her hands and let him study it for a moment.

"It may mean nothing to you, Laban Joyce, but to others it is everything."

"It was the League of the Black Tie that sent you on that awful ride over the Sonoma Hills."

"I know that. I feel in my flesh to-night the knots that burrowed in it at that time. As I have told you, the League of the Black Tie is here. It is as strongly organized and ten times as deadly as it was in Sundown. I hate it! I will not conceal my hatred from you, for you have no cause for loving it. You have been doomed."

He sat still and watched her.

"You have been marked. The lot has been cast, and you are to die within twenty-four hours."

Joyce started from his chair.

"My God! woman, you don't mean that?" he cried.

"I mean every word of it," she said, looking into his eyes with calmness.

"Then you should have let me go to Captain Hiram. He will ferret them out and run the villains to earth."

"I will give him a clew after it is done."

"What, after I have been murdered?"

"Yes."

Joyce turned pale and looked at the woman as if he thought her out of her head.

"There is no escape from the hand of the League. You can't get out of the coil of the Silken Tie."

"Is he at the head of it—the Man from Montana?"

"Yes. The hand of the dead directs the movements of the League. You don't know how far-reaching it is. It will surely carry out its decree. You will be dead within twenty-four hours!"

"Woman, it can't be! You don't know what I can do within that time. I can be miles from the city. I can be on the sea."

"I don't care. You can't escape the Black Tie. I tell you this in all candor, Laban Joyce; and I say, too, that I really have no cause to come to you with this story, for you know that you might have put forth your hand when I was lashed to the black steed, but you did not."

"I—I—"

"Never mind!" interrupted the woman with a wave of the hand. "I don't want any excuses. A man with but twenty-four hours of life before him need not waste any of it in such follies."

"How will the end come?"

"I can't tell you. The Black Tie will answer that question."

"I will fight it. I will go back to the detective. I will give him the whole story—"

"Will you tell him the truth of your life at Sundown? Will you dare to give him all the chapters of your life?"

Laban Joyce seemed to shrink within himself.

"Go home and prepare to die—that's what you ought to do," was the response.

He said nothing.

"You ought to make provision for Portia. She looks like her mother, you know."

The man seemed to groan and his hands trembled when they touched the table.

"I don't want to take up too much of your circumscribed time," continued the woman. "I want you to spend some of it with Portia. I really believe you love her. In a few hours they will have your name in the newspapers and you will be one of the criminal mysteries of the city. No, I don't want to keep you here."

The woman crossed the room and laid her hand on the door.

Laban Joyce looked at her and all of a sudden his eyes seemed to flash like twin stars.

"You can't show your old mountain blood and fight off the pack," she said, looking back over her shoulder. "I would like to see you do it, but you can't. I will give Hiram Hercules the clew, but to do so now would not save you. You are doomed."

She opened the door and held it open for him to pass out.

"Good-by," she went on. "It is for the last time in life."

"Pish! I know what will happen! The cowards will be balked. I am to be bled by some infernal conspiracy. Do you think that I can't escape assassination—I who have millions at my command, and who can keep from my own house, if I choose to hide there, the cord of the League?"

"You can't."

"By heavens, I will!"

With a smile on her white face—a smile that brightened her black eyes—Marcia held out her hand and almost forced it into his palm.

"I retract. You can," she said. "You can escape the Black Tie."

"How?"

"By suicide!"

"Never! I would sooner die a thousand deaths than have Portia stand over the coffin of a suicide."

"Just as you will," smiled the woman at the door. "There is absolutely no hope."

She hurried him from her presence.

She listened to his footsteps as he went down her stairs, and when the door had closed on his form, she turned back and halted in the middle of the room.

"He will be a dead man within twenty-four hours. Nothing can save that man. The Man from Montana—he who fell down into the Bottomless Pit, is here, and at his back and beck is the coolest band of villains—the most secret band that ever cursed the land. He doubts me. He believes that he can escape the doom which has been marked out for him. Fool! Even now he is in the shadow, and ere long will be food for the detectives."

Laban Joyce went back to the rooms of Hiram Hercules, the detective.

This time there was no figure in the lower hall to disturb or stop him, and he went up to the door and knocked.

No one came forward to open the door, and after repeated raps, he retired and went down the stairs again.

"Shall I hunt up another?" he asked himself on the sidewalk. "If what Marcia said is true, time is slipping away, and I need a good deal to fix my affairs."

He went home. Once in the library he sunk into a chair, and drew from a drawer a package of papers, which he opened and read.

Something came down the stairway outside. It had a soft step, and seemed to halt at his door.

By and by it went back and the figure of a young girl opened a door on the floor above and stole softly into a room.

"I feared he was out and that my dream was true," she said to herself. "I dreamed that he had been found dead on the street with a strange mark about his throat, but he is safe, for I just heard him in the library."

Portia went back to her couch.

The clock ticked away the moments of that eventful night, and day dawned.

It was nearly seven when Portia came tripping down stairs and stopped at the door of the library.

It stood ajar.

The girl leaned forward and laid her hand on the knob.

"I don't hear him and yet he is always there at this hour," she said. "I will steal in and—"

She had swung the portal back and was in the room.

The next moment she had rushed forward and stood like a statue over the man leaning back in the chair at the table.

She had seen death before—this young girl had—and it needed no second look to tell her that the man in the chair was dead, and that a part of her terrible dream had come true.

There was a strange mark on Laban Joyce's throat.

It was the seal of the Black Tie!

CHAPTER III.

MARCIA IS AS GOOD AS HER WORD.

PORTIA, as we have said, knew but little of her father's past life. She had a faint recollection of the mountains, of a strange region, some remembrance of camps and rough men, but it was as an indistinct dream, so vague that whenever she thought of it she could fix no incident in her mind.

More than once she had sought the library with the intention of asking her father about it all, but she had stopped at the threshold. She never got further than the door; something seemed to hold her back.

Perhaps she was treading on the heels of a secret which he did not want exposed and perhaps she was going too far with her desires.

Now it was too late! Death had entered the house and her father was beyond the telling of anything that was mysterious.

As Portia stood in that room as silent as the grave, she thought of a thousand things.

She looked again and saw the mark on the white throat of the dead.

All at once she bent forward and inspected it with her eyes nearly touching the skin.

It was there just as she had seen it in her dream; it was real, no phantasm at all.

Portia was nineteen and beautiful, with a full figure and an olive skin. Her eyes were deep

and lustrous and there was something about them which spoke of coolness under trial and something in her look which told that, when occasion required, she could be a heroine of the foremost sort.

The first thought the girl framed was of what would have to take place. She knew that the police would have to be informed of the crime—for crime it was, as the dark mark said.

Then she thought of the *post mortem* and what the papers would say about the murder.

She knew that her name would be dragged into the light, that the irresistible reporters would come and question her in the midst of her grief; that the murder would be on everybody's tongue and, finally, that she might be suspected of knowing more about it than she would tell.

A man sitting in a neat little room on Broadway—a room that looked down upon that great artery of New York as well as upon another street that ran into it, was apparently at leisure when he was startled by a knock on the door, and to his summons, "Come in!" a woman entered.

"Well, madame, what can I do for you?"

He had said this to a thousand women, in his time. He had asked them what he could do for them, when every one who sought him out was in distress and had poured into his ears the story of crime and suffering.

But this morning Captain Hiram Hercules, —the Strong-Arm Detective, as he was called, but known to the force as the Broadway Sifter—looked with more than usual scrutiny into the face before him, and when he heard the voice of his visitor he seemed to smile as if he had heard it before.

She came forward and stopped at the detective's chair.

"There is something for you to do, and yet I find you sitting here doing nothing. Why don't you go out and discover who killed Laban Joyce last night?"

"Laban Joyce?"

"Yes, the nabob of — avenue. You haven't heard it yet?"

"Indeed I have not."

"He is dead. He was killed by some one in his library. Laban Joyce, the millionaire—the man who has the pretty daughter called Portia. There is mystery for you, Captain Hercules. Do you always wait till a clew comes to you?"

"Not at all. But this is somewhat sudden and altogether unexpected. I had not been out and did not know that a murder had been committed. Do you live at Laban Joyce's?"

"If I lived there perhaps the murder would not have taken place according to programme."

"According to programme? Then you know something, woman, about the affair?"

Captain Hiram had sprung to his feet and now went to the door.

Turning the key on the lock, he came back to the woman and said:

"I may not have anything to do with this," he said. "I may not be drawn into the case at all, but you know something. In short I believe you can give me a clew as to who killed Laban Joyce."

She said nothing, and seemed to defy him, and glancing at the door a smile for a second lay upon her bloodless lips.

"I told him last night that he would die within twenty-four hours. I gave him to understand that he was in the shadow of death—that there was no escape for him. I even promised to come to you after the murder and give you a clew."

"But, why didn't you try to prevent the murder?"

"It could not have been prevented. Besides, I didn't want to do that."

"Didn't you want to save Laban Joyce's life?"

"I won't say that. I might have sent you word weeks ago, but I preferred not to."

The woman, who was Marcia the Soft-Handed, saw that a pair of keen eyes were scanning her closely.

"You did not like the dead man?"

"I—did—not. There was a time when I thought well of Laban Joyce, but it was when he was in another part of the country and when he had not amassed a fortune in stocks in this wicked city."

"You knew him elsewhere, then?"

"I knew him in Sundown."

"Where is that?"

"In the wild West. You have heard of Sundown, I suppose. I saw the town spring into existence. I was there when the first shanty was built, and when Long Paul, the first man to die with his boots on, went down the trail to the mountain cemetery. After that the men of money came. There were nine of them—we called them the Nine of Diamonds. One by one they followed Long Paul. The ninth man fared a little better. He was a man in gloves and knew how to handle the toughs of Sundown. After awhile there sprang up an Order which ruled things with a heavy hand. It was the most merciless and dreaded Order that ever afflicted the West. It struck down all those who opposed it in any way and we did not know who

were its members, nor where to look for the next blow."

"What was it called?"

"The Black Tie!" and she was proceeding to explain when the detective continued:

"I know what you are going to say, I think. You are about to tell me that the Black Tie is in New York?"

"How know you that?"

"I will tell you after awhile. I want to hear first what you have to say."

"Yes, it is here. Though I have not crossed the threshold of Laban Joyce's house: though no one has told me that he is dead; I know just as well that this is true as if a messenger had just come to me from the scene. You will find on Laban Joyce's throat when you go thither a mark, which is the sign of the League of the Black Tie. I have seen it on the throats of others, but not here. Laban Joyce was the ninth and last nabob of Sundown."

"But, he was not Laban Joyce, then?"

"He was Major Marmaduke. As such he was the richest person in camp, owned the Uncrowned Angel, a mine which was said to have belonged to the old Spaniards and knew more about leads than any living man in the whole country. He might be there yet if the Black Tie hadn't risen against him. You should have seen what took place when he and the secret leaguers locked horns. I got mixed up in the affair and was the only woman ever spared by the Black Tie. Spared!" and the woman laughed derisively.

"I was lashed, Mazepa-like, to a wild horse and turned a drift at dead of night in the wildest region of the ranges. The memory of that torturing ride will never leave me. It was a ride to the very portals of doom."

She stopped and her hands were clinched.

"Let me tell no more about that ride now," she resumed. "We have other things to engage our thoughts just now. There is the dead—the man who lies in his wealthy home with the mark of the Black Tie on his throat. You should see it, Hiram Hercules! You know where he lived. It is murder—nothing less. They black-mailed him first—took five thousand dollars from him, and would have taken more if the ball had not dropped into the lower box."

"What do you mean?"

"Pardon me. You have never seen the ball drop. That is what cost me that terrible jaunt across the cactus lands of the Southwest. You may see it drop some time, but I trust not. The Black Tie have rites that are inexorable and oaths that are never broken. It seems strange that it should be transferred from the mountains to the city—that it should leave its mark on the throat of the millionaire of the avenue; that the Black Tie which came into being during the wild-cat days of Sundown, should flourish here—very strange indeed!"

Marcia stopped and the detective watched the strange play of light and shadow on her expressive face.

"Well?" he said at last, "what is the clew you have for me?"

"Are you going to undertake the solving of this murder mystery?"

"I think I shall."

"You may find yourself in the toils. The Black Tie is not one hand but many. It is more powerful than you think."

"Granted."

"It has a way of finding out secrets that is simply marvelous. Its trails are everywhere, but no one sees them. I know but few of them."

"But you know some. You know what is at the head of the League."

There was no reply. The woman was looking from the window down into the street, already thronged with the busy life of the city.

Captain Hiram studied the face, now so clear cut and pale. He saw the keen eyes that looked out from her head and noted how shapely and soft were the hands.

But something in her mien and face-expression deeply impressed him.

Suddenly she sprang to her feet.

"I can't tell you any more—not now at least," she announced. "You will have to go to the house for points. Maybe the Black Tie left a clew there."

He saw her go to the door, excited and all in a tremble, but did not interfere.

"Let me out, please!"

"Shall I see you again?"

"Yes—if the Black Tie don't interfere."

Captain Hiram opened the door.

"Is this true?" he asked himself when she went down stairs. "Has there been a murder committed, or is this woman mad?"

The detective followed her down to the street, and was soon at her heels, to discover that Marcia was not alone; a man was walking at her side, leaning toward her and talking rapidly, in low tones.

And such a man!

His body looked misshapen, and his shoulder seemed to droop, though in reality it did not. Hercules saw that his hair was red and that he wore slippers as if he had just emerged from a work-bench.

He tripped alongside of the woman, and while

he talked to her, reminded the Sifter of Satan at the ear of Eve.

What was the man saying?

Captain Hiram would have given a good deal to have found out. He dared not approach too close, as he stood a chance of being recognized; but on going as near as he dared, he heard the man say:

"The black ball has dropped again. Is it for you or I, Marcia?"

The woman shook her head.

The next moment the pair turned a corner and passed out of sight, but the Strong-Arm Detective did not let this incident baffle him. He was determined to discover where the couple lived.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FRENCH GIRL'S STORY.

CAPTAIN HIRAM stood for the first time under the roof of Laban Joyce's house—alone in the library where the millionaire had been discovered by his daughter. The detective was waiting for some one, for he watched the door as if expecting some one to enter.

He had gone to the scene of the crime after following Marcia and her friend.

Others had been there before him, and Portia knew nothing of the ferret whom her father had come so near visiting shortly before his death.

On the table lay everything as it had been left by the dead man.

Captain Hercules stood near this table and was looking at its contents when he heard the door open; but instead of Portia, a young girl appeared, who immediately shrunk back at sight of him, uttering a slight cry of surprise as she withdrew, but the detective knew that she had stopped just beyond the door in the hall and was listening there.

He went toward the door and discovered her exactly where he thought to find her.

Her sylph-like figure was leaning against the wall, and he looked into a face as white as a sheet and strangely pinched, for it was unnaturally thin.

"I thought to find Miss Portia in the library," stammered the girl. "I did not know any one was there. I am Amie."

"Amie who?"

"Amie Gleason. I am Miss Portia's French teacher."

"When did you come?"

Captain Hercules had caught the girl's arm and pulled her unresisting into the library.

"You are her French teacher, are you?" he repeated, looking again into her face. "Were you in the house last night?"

The girl had dropped into a chair and covered her face with her hands.

"I was here. I have been in this house for nearly two weeks. I have a room—I—"

The detective saw that she was terribly agitated and for a minute let her have her way.

He watched the storm of excitement sweep over her slight figure and smiled to himself when he saw her coming round again.

"I came in to find Miss Portia. I thought she might be here, you know. It is terrible, isn't it?"

"Terrible!" echoed the clew-hunter. "But, there have been other deaths just as terrible. Did you hear hear anything last night?"

The girl appeared to shrink from the inquisitor.

"I wish I could forget last night," she said.

"I don't want to think of it. Will they want to question me when they come to the examination?"

"They may."

"My God! why was I ever born? I don't want to tell a single thing about last night. I will die first!"

What did she mean?

The detective continued to watch her and all at once he leaped toward her chair and laid his hand upon her arm.

"You might tell me something which you need not tell again," he said.

"Who are you?"

"A detective—Captain Hercules!"

Again she fell back to the depths of the chair and from thence stared at him while her bosom seemed to rise and fall with unsubsided excitement.

"You saw something last night and in this house?" Captain Hercules suggested.

His eye was fastened upon the girl and she was trying to avoid it—an impossibility.

"Girl, you must tell me," he went on sternly. "Must! That is a hard word. I know what it means."

"Go on, then."

"Were you awake when the deed was done?" She fell back again with a start.

"Very well," said Hiram, coolly. "I will have to see that you talk elsewhere."

"At the examination?"

"Perhaps."

Amie Gleason's lips twitched.

"I was awake," she went on after a pause. "I could not sleep last night, as if the shadow of that deed threw itself before. I remember how often I turned on my pillow hoping to

snatch slumber by a change of position, but, sleep would not come. At last I rose and went out into the corridor near my room. I was but half-dressed and shivered in the cool air of morning."

"It was morning, was it?"

"Yes. While I stood there the clock on the next Square struck two."

"Two and no more, Miss Gleason?"

"Two and no more. I hear the sounds this very moment. As I was saying, I stood there in a fright with every sense on the alert. I heard everything, even to the beating of my own heart. Presently I saw— No, I can't proceed. I will not!"

She sprang up, but the Strong-Arm Detective caught her wrist and pulled her back into the chair.

"You don't want me to hang some one, do you?" she cried.

"I want to know exactly what you saw last night," he insisted.

Her lips came together, and for some moments Captain Hercules had to look at her, believing that he had found the coolest, strangest bit of femininity he had ever encountered.

"Go on," he ordered, firmly.

The French teacher took a long breath.

"I saw coming up the stairs a white figure, at sight of which I drew back and held my breath. I saw it approach, half-believing that it was some supernatural creature called up by my sleeplessness; but, when I discovered the truth, I nearly fell to the floor, and it was with difficulty that I did not cry out and betray myself."

"Well?"

"I saw it pass me and stop at another door. I looked, rubbed my eyes, pinched myself. I could not believe my senses. It was terrible. Presently I saw a hand put out and the door opened. The figure had vanished; it had passed into Miss Portia's room."

Captain Hercules did not start.

Something seemed to have prepared the detective for this *denouement*, for he merely looked at the French teacher and bade her go on.

His very coolness seemed to surprise her.

"I saw nothing more. I mean I saw nothing more on that floor."

"You went below, then?"

"I did. Some hand seemed to drag me down stairs. It led me to the door of the library. It stood ajar."

"As Miss Portia found it this morning?"

"Yes. I stopped there and listened. Not a sound did I hear. I saw that the room was dimly lighted, that the shadow of the arm-chair at the table fell at the threshold, and I opened the door and looked in. What did I see? A man whom I knew to be Mr. Joyce was sitting in the chair. At first sight I thought him asleep, but the moment I looked down into his face I started back with a wild cry, and fell to the floor. I knew he was dead, and what startled me most was a mark on his throat, not the mark of a hand, but rather of a cord, as if he had been strangled."

Amie Gleason paused and seemed to shudder.

"I went back to my room," she went on at last. "I feared to disturb Miss Portia, for I dared not go to her door and tell her of the dreadful sight in the library after what I had seen. She came up the stairs, for I had watched her, breathless and filled with an unknown terror, which seemed to root me to the floor. When I came to myself I was lying across my own couch, and for the life of me I cannot say how I got there. It seems a horrible nightmare, but the corpse in your room, the bruise I carry on my head because of the fall, and the other proofs of my visit to this room last night, convince me against my will that it is stern reality—that a crime has been committed, and that Mr. Joyce was the victim."

Captain Hiram let the woman go to the end of her narrative without much questioning.

"Does Miss Portia walk in her sleep?" he asked, as if incidentally.

"I have never known her to."

"Do you?"

A smile came to the white face of the French teacher.

"I do not," she answered with positiveness.

"None of our family have been somnambulists. I wish I could think with you that I may have been mistaken last night, that— But I could not be deceived for I stood within three feet of Miss Portia when she passed to her room."

The alert clew-hunter, looked around the room and discovered on the table an unsealed letter which he picked up.

It was addressed to Laban Joyce, and evidently had escaped the eyes of those who had been in the room since the crime. It looked as though it had been underneath a blotter and had been revealed by shifting the things on the table.

The French teacher saw the detective pull the letter from the envelope and glance at the writing.

Captain Hiram threw the letter back upon the table.

"You don't want to be summoned before the coroner, do you?" he asked.

"In heaven's name no! I think the world of Miss Portia. I do not want to be dragged into

this terrible case at all. It was with reluctance that I was induced to tell you what I have, and I hope it will end there."

A minute later the clew-hunter watched her glide from the room, leaving behind her a recollection of which he could not brush aside.

There was something strangely fascinating in the look of the white-faced girl who had told such a strange story of the doings of the past night.

He heard her go up-stairs.

All at once the sounds of footsteps grew still as if Amie had stopped midway up the flight.

Captain Hercules picked up the letter and concealed it in his bosom.

"It's not much, but it may be something," he said to himself. "The French girl is a cool one, for all her by-play of horror and reluctance. Did she really see Portia come up from this floor at two this morning? Was she in this room and the first to discover the crime? And she saw the mark of the Black Tie—the League mentioned by Marcia my visitor this morning!"

The Broadway Hawkshaw had already and almost unconsciously taken hold of the greatest mystery of his life and had entered into a game which was to be the most exciting of his long detective career.

He did not wait to see Portia, but quietly left the house, glancing up as he struck the sidewalk to see a pair of eyes at one of the windows, but the moment he saw them they were withdrawn.

Just at sundown the detective entered a shop which was lower than the pavement and pushing open a door, he stood face to face with a man who looked up and then dropped his eyes, while a blush stole through his thin beard.

Captain Hercules stood over the man, who was a shoemaker, and after looking at him a moment, said:

"Did you write this letter?"

A start was the result; the cobbler put forth one hand, but quickly drew it back.

"Yes; I wrote that," he confessed.

"When?"

"Yesterday."

"To Laban Joyce?"

"Yes."

"Do you know he is dead?"

The man gave a sudden start.

"Dead?" he echoed incredulously.

"He's been murdered."

"My God! Murdered by the Black Tie! I'll bet my head on that!"

The Broadway Sifter looked at the shoemaker and smiled.

CHAPTER V. ANOTHER DEATH.

SILAS SHRIMP had dropped the shoe and was staring at the detective with his eyes bulging from his head and drops of cold sweat on his forehead.

The room was small and illy ventilated; Hercules stood over the cobbler and was watching him intently.

"You don't mean that? You don't mean that Laban Joyce is dead?"

"He is dead. It is a case of murder."

Shrimp took a long breath.

"Are you a detective?"

A smile stole over the other's countenance.

"Where did you get that letter?"

"At the house."

"He didn't burn it, then?"

"It seems not."

Shrimp thought a moment, then he opened a drawer in his workbench and took out something that was small and glittered.

It shone because there was a rent in the wrapper, and when the cobbler had opened it the detective saw the broken blade of a dagger.

"This tried to kill him once," explained Silas.

"He was followed one night in this city and I was fortunately at his heels, though he knew it not. A man sprung out from the shadows of an alley and almost before I could lift my hand, the blade came down and Laban Joyce, as he was called, was within an ace of death."

"You saved him, did you?"

"I saved him. I sprung between him and the man who wanted his blood and the dagger was broken in the struggle. I picked up the blade as a memento of the battle and there it is."

Captain Hiram took the blade and looked at it a moment.

"The dagger didn't find him this time, did it?"

"No. He seems to have been strangled."

"By the Black Tie, of course."

"What do you know about it?"

"Look here! There are secrets which we don't like to let out, especially when they concern us," answered the cobbler. "You are on the trail. I know something about men of your ilk. Pardon me for being so plain. Perhaps if I don't tell you something you will find out anyhow, and I will be under suspicion."

"Just as you please, Mr. Shrimp."

Silas crossed his legs and resumed.

"I haven't always been here at this bench, though I was cut out for a cobbler. I've seen some tough times and my aim has been to keep out of sight as much as possible. Some years ago I got the silver fever. I went West; I became a tough in more senses than one. I've tramped over a good part of the wild West, and

worn out more soles than I ever mended. You would not think it to see me here at this bench, eh, Mr. Detective?"

"You don't look like a silver-hunter."

"Perhaps not, but I've seen the ups and downs of more than one camp. I was at Sundown when they had the trouble with the Nine Nabobs. I saw them depart one by one—the last one alone escaping the hand of the dread Vigilance Committee, which was called by some 'the Black Tie.' In the West among the wild camps was formed that dread League whose hand is at work in this city. Heaven knows when it came here. I thought of it the moment you told me that Laban Joyce was dead, for he was the ninth nabob and the only one who escaped a violent death. He was 'Major Marmaduke' with us, and though he was a man of some merit, he was reckless, and ruled with an iron hand."

Hercules thought of what he had heard from his visitor, Marcia, the Soft-Handed. It seemed to him that the combatants of Sundown had gathered in Gotham, that the vultures of the silver hills had flocked to the metropolis of the seaboard, and that the fight for power and vengeance had been transferred to New York from the mountains of the far West.

"What about the head of the Black Tie?" he asked the cobbler.

"The Man from Montana, as we called him? He vanished one night. He disappeared as if the mountain had swallowed him."

Captain Hiram was about to speak again when the cobbler sprang up and ran to the door.

There he stopped and listened with his ear at the crack, while the Sifter watched him, wondering if he was hearing any sounds beyond the door.

When he came back he went to his bench, and picked up a shoe-knife, about the handle of which he wound his hand, while he glanced half savagely at the door.

"Some one's out yonder," he said, looking at Hercules.

"Then you don't want to hurt him. Let me take a look at him."

"I have heard him there before. I have been sitting at the bench and heard footsteps come down the steps and stop at the door, but I have never been able to catch sight of the spy. I will have him now, I think."

But the agile detective caught the man's arm and pulled him back, while he stepped between him and the door.

In another moment he had opened the door, and was staring at—nothing!

"Just as I thought," he remarked with a smile, stepping into the little space outside.

"Oh, you won't see him by going up to the sidewalk."

Captain Hercules did not stop. At first he saw no one who excited his suspicions, but all at once he caught sight of a figure which attracted his attention.

It stood in the shadow of the adjoining house, backed up against the wall and the clew-hunter made out the outlines of a man's form.

He fell back, and the figure came out of the shadows.

It moved toward the cobbler's shop and the schooled shadower hugging the wall alongside the steps watched with the eyes of an eagle.

Down the steps came the man, and when he was within reach of the Hawkshaw's arm it was outstretched. The man fell back with a cry but not quick enough to escape, and Captain Hiram dragged his victim into the shop, where he presented him to the excited Silas.

"Shut the door! This is the spy!" cried the cobbler catching hold of the prisoner's sleeve and reaching at the same time for the shoe-knife.

But, the next moment, he relaxed his hold, and dropped back upon the bench with a blanched face and trembling lips.

"Let him go!" he said to the detective. "I was mistaken. He is not the man."

The look which had passed between the two had not escaped the detective's observation, and instead of releasing the man he turned to the cobbler and said:

"He came sneaking down your steps and you said you have heard some one there before."

"But it was not this man. I once caught sight of the spy. He was larger than this person and did not look at all like him. No, he is not the man I want."

All this time the man held by the detective had not said a word. He was near middle age, with a thin face, a keen eye and a wiry figure.

He contented himself with watching the cobbler, and did not seem to care a snap for the man in whose grip he was.

"Let him go!" urged Silas. "We will find the real spy one of these days."

Captain Hercules obeyed and the man stepped back and touched his hat to the two men.

He went to the door and opening it said, "Good-night, gentlemen"—the first words he had spoken—then was gone.

"It's queer that that man should come to my shop as you say he did," said Silas. "Maybe he wanted some mending done."

"With a pair of new shoes on his feet?"

"I did not look at his feet."

"You may have been mistaken after all. I may have taken the wrong man, but he was lurking in the shadows up there and came down your steps, like a spy."

There was no answer.

Silas Shrimp went back to his bench.

"Why should you be watched by a spy?" asked the detective. "You wrote Laban Joyce for money—you told him in the letter that you were in need; you reminded him that you are the man who saved him from the assassin—"

"I needed money and he had so much of it!" interrupted Shrimp. "I thought that as I had done him a favor, he might return the compliment. But, since he is dead, I won't get a dollar."

"What kind of looking man was it from whom you saved Joyce that night?"

"I didn't get to see much of him for it was all over in a second. The struggle was in the dark and I was glad when it was over—glad to let him go."

"Was he tall, short, thin or stout?"

"I really can't tell you—it was all over so soon."

"But you had your eyes with you?"

"Yes; but I tell you it was over in so short a time that I couldn't see much of him. He went off like a flash, leaving the broken dagger in my hands."

Captain Hiram of the Strong Arm looked at the man and said to himself:

"He isn't telling all he knows. He knew that the man I captured to-night was a spy—he has seen him before. There is more mystery than I thought about the death of Laban Joyce, alias Major Marmaduke. The Black Tie is at work, sure enough. It is all-powerful. I will go back to the other trail now, for the whole scheme must be sifted to the very bottom!"

Ten minutes later Hercules stood on the sidewalk above the cobbler's shop. Marcia, the Soft-Handed, had given him her address and he resolved to seek her out. She lived on a quiet street, near the river, and the detective at length found himself in the vicinity of her home—only to be stopped by a hand, and turning, saw standing by him a man who grinned from ear to ear when their eyes met.

"Huntin' 'em still, eh?"

"Feathers!" exclaimed the clew-hunter.

"I'm still out o' jail, which is a miracle, eh?" remarked the man.

Captain Hiram stepped aside and they passed into an alleyway while Feathers showed his eagerness by pulling the other deeper into the shades.

"In here. I have a new nest—one you have never seen, I guess. I've been here for more'n two weeks an' I find it a neat place for a man o' my stamp."

The ex-convict looked at the man-hunter and seemed to study his face a full minute.

"I pulled you in here to get you free from the shadow on your track."

"The shadow on my track?" echoed the detective.

"Yes. You didn't see 'im, I guess. He was there just the same and I saw him if you didn't."

"What was he like, Feathers?"

"He was thin as a rail, a man I wouldn't like to have after me. I can see pretty well if I have but one peeper. I make it do the work of two. He won't find you here."

Feathers folded his arms and seemed to take delight in studying the man he had drawn into the poor den he inhabited.

"What are you doing now, Feathers?"

"Fleecin'."

"You don't mean to tell me that you are still trying to break into another prison?"

"Can't help it. Me an' Mole are at it, but you know, Captain Hercules, that we will keep out o' your road."

Feathers had thrown his dark hands about his knees and was looking over them at the man who occupied a seat in his room.

"Will you remain here till I look out an' see how the coast is?"

Captain Hiram nodded and Feathers departed. Presently the jail-bird came back, and staggering toward the couch in one corner of the room, fell cross it, with a cry.

"I—found—him!" he said, with a gasp. "I got too near the scorpion. It stung me!"

Hercules had lifted the man and was looking for the wound beneath the hand that was clutched on the bleeding bosom.

"Captain Hiram, I want you to find who did it," continued Feathers. "I think he finished me—did it so quick that I hadn't a chance to help myself. He belongs to the Black Tie, but this time he didn't use the cord. I reckon he thought the knife was swifter. He was a thin-faced man. I knew him in Sundown. They called him Hungry Dick and once we had him in the noose, but he slipped out like an eel."

The detective laid the stricken man upon the couch and went to the door.

He was almost sure a sound had fallen upon his ear from that direction.

As he turned he heard a noise toward the couch and when he looked at Feathers he was writing on the wall.

He saw the hand move across the plastering

with the stub of a pencil clutched between the dirty fingers and when he looked at the door again a footstep receded.

"That's the truth, captain!" said Feathers, as the detective sprung toward him. "As I am dying, that's the Holy Gospel! It'll give you a clew."

Captain Hiram, seizing the lamp from the table, leaned over the silent man to read the message on the wall.

"Find Dot and tell her to give you the red package. Dot lives at No. 233 M— street, second floor," he read.

Hiram looked down at the man.

"Who is Dot, Feathers?"

There was no answer; Feathers was dead!

CHAPTER VI. THE MISSING LINK.

CAPTAIN HIRAM HERCULES stood over the dead man a few moments, and then turned the light low.

He had known him for years—known him for a law-breaker. He had even arrested him, and his testimony it was which had sent the crook up the river the last time.

But, Feathers was forgiving. He was a man who had seen a good deal of the world, who had been a happy man before crime had tempted him, and there were not many who knew that he had a daughter—the offspring of his marriage when he was not steeped in guilt, and could look honest people in the face without blushing.

Feathers had never told Hiram that he had a child. He had kept this secret from nearly every one.

He did not want the world to know that the girl who lived in a plain little house, and whose life was as pure as a child's, was the daughter of Feathers, the jail-bird.

When Captain Hiram went from that room where the dead lay, on the convict's rough couch, he was more careful than usual.

He had been tracked from the shoemaker's, so Feathers said, and he did not want to be followed again.

Was he in the shadow of the Black Tie?

"Time enough to see the Soft-Handed," he said to himself. "I will find Dot and the red package first."

He passed down one street and turned into another, until at length he drew up in front of the number left by Feathers on the wall, and knocked.

It was not late, and there were a good many people on the street.

In a little while his rap was answered by a footstep in the hall, and he saw a face peering into his from semi-darkness.

Captain Hiram slipped into the hall, and the woman, drawing back, looked at him with bulging eyes and a pale face.

She was barely twenty, but there was care on every lineament, and poverty looked out from the folds of her garment.

"Are you Miss Dot?" asked Hiram.

"No, sir. I am Miss Acton. I board here. Miss Dot went off yesterday."

"Went away?"

"Yes, sir."

"When will she return?"

"I can't say. She has gone for good. She changed her boarding place, and—"

"She is never coming back to this house!" broke in a voice from the opposite of the hall, and a virago appeared and flashed the light of her malignant nature upon the detective.

"She got high toned, that girl did!" she resumed. "All at once she comes to me, what treated her well, almost like a queen, and says: 'I'm goin' off, and off she went.'"

The young girl drew back among the shadows and smiled, but it was a poor attempt at mirth.

"You don't know where she is, I suppose?"

"No, nor do I want to. Why, she was as poor as a church mouse, but when she came to pay me she had a roll of bills as thick as your wrist. Where did she get them? I don't know. I ask no questions, but I have my opinion and—"

"I know all about Dot and she—"

"Wait till you're told to give an opinion," interrupted the woman, turning upon the girl with the look of a tigress. "You won't find her in this house."

Hercules was nonplused.

He saw that the thin-faced creature wanted to speak, but that she was prevented by the sharp eyes of the virago who stood between him and her.

"Who are you?" the woman suddenly asked.

"My name is Jordan."

"Not Dan Jordan—the man I used to know?"

"I hope not."

"Well, he was the meanest man I ever saw. The Jordans were all mean people, but Dan was the worst."

"You haven't a good opinion of him, I see."

"I should say not; I would like to see him. It has been ten years and more since I saw him last. Jordan, eh? Where from?"

"From Colorado."

Captain Hiram received a look of malignity and concluded to withdraw.

As he moved toward the door the girl slipped forward and something was thrust in his hand.

Feeling a bit of paper, he closed on it and carried it out into the street.

At the first lamp he read:

"Dot went off in a hack with a man. That is all I know."

The clew-hunter looked defeated for a moment.

He went back and looked at the house, half believing that perhaps Miss Acton was in league with the landlady to defeat his purpose, but her sad face, her pinched features and deep eyes of real sadness, told another story.

Dot had eluded him and he had come from Feathers, the dead, to discover that she had vanished.

Now for Marcia.

Captain Hiram sought the house inhabited by the Soft-Handed, and when he knocked he wondered what adventure would befall him under that roof.

Marcia opened the door herself.

The detective followed her to her room and turned on him with a singular look.

"Well, you have come to see me, have you? You found things as I told you?"

"Yes. Laban Joyce is dead."

"Murdered by the Black Tie! I know that. What have you found out?"

"I have not fairly taken the trail."

"But you are going to take it?"

"I think I shall."

Marcia looked at him a few moments.

"The whole horde of Sundown has been drawn to this city by some process of fate. The old feud has been revived and the Black Tie is at work. Did you see Portia?"

"No; though I was in the house some time, I came away without seeing the young lady."

"I wish you could have seen her; but you will."

"I saw Miss Amie."

"Who is Amie?" asked Marcia.

"The French teacher."

"I didn't know she has one."

"Oh, yes. She is a woman who has the blackest eyes of any person I ever saw."

"How long has she been there?"

"I cannot say exactly. She lives in the house."

"Amie does?"

"Yes."

Marcia crossed the room and opened a trunk. Diving one hand into its depths, she fished up a package of photographs, some poor affairs as if they were taken under certain disadvantages, and untying them, threw them before the detective.

"See if you can find any face there that resembles Amie's," she requested.

The detective turned them over and looked at every one.

Suddenly he stopped and Marcia leaned forward.

"This is Amie," and he held up a picture, at sight of which Marcia laughed.

"Are you sure of it?"

"The eyes are the same, and although this picture must have been taken some time ago, it is Amie all the same."

Marcia took the photograph and looked at it some time before she spoke again.

"So she is under the same roof that shelters Portia? You have met her there, you say?"

"I talked with her in the library."

"Did she know anything about the nabob's death?"

"She had a strange experience in the house at the time of the crime."

"Did she tell you?"

"Yes."

"Willingly?"

"Not very willingly at first."

"It seemed to come out word by word at first, did it?"

"Word by word."

"But she told everything down to the minutest particulars, didn't she?"

"She did."

"That's in the blood," smiled Marcia.

The detective said nothing, but looked at the woman in silence.

"That is the photograph of the Cactus Belle," she said. "You held in your hand the picture of Amie, Portia's French teacher, and the photograph of the Cactus Belle as well. I had lost sight of the girl for some time, though last summer I thought I met her in the Park; but I lost her in a flash. Now everything is clear."

"Do you mean that Amie has been a character in the Southwest?"

"I mean nothing else. You must be prepared for surprises on this trail, Captain Hiram. They are all here," and Marcia smiled.

"It seems so," and then the detective thought of Feathers dead in his hovel near the river.

"Did you know Feathers?" he asked.

"What of Feathers?"

"The man is dead."

"Not Feathers? Why—"

She stopped and ran back to the old trunk and snatched from its depths something which she carried to the detective.

"You mean the man with the single eye and the strange scar over the other one?"

"Yes."

"In God's name, what will become of Dot now?"

"Who is Dot?"

"Feathers's daughter."

"I didn't know he had a child."

Marcia stood white-faced before the man-hunter, but all at once she sunk limp and motionless into the chair.

"Dot is missing. I have just come from her home, and she went off with a man."

"With—a—man?" gasped Marcia.

"So Miss Acton said."

"Merciful heavens!" cried the woman. "The Black Tie is about the throat of Dot! Hiram Hercules, you must help me now! I appeal to you—I, Marcia, the Soft-Handed. There is a secret I dare not breathe yet. You must find Dot for me. You must strike the trail of the runaway. She is the missing link of the crime of the avenue. You must find Dot or lose the game!"

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE BLACK TIE'S GRIP.

A WOMAN stood in the shadow of a house that seemed older than its companions.

It was the same night as that which witnessed the scenes of the preceding chapter and Captain Hiram, the man of trails, had gone out from Marcia's little chamber with her last words—an appeal for help—ringing in his ears.

This woman seemed to be waiting for some one to emerge from the old house, and she cast covert glances at one of the second story windows as if watching it more than the house itself.

Presently the door opened and a man slipped out and being joined by the watcher, moved off toward the river which ran past the foot of the street.

It was nearly midnight, but the two kept on until they could have looked out upon the waters.

"This way," said the man and they vanished.

"You don't want to be seen in the old house, eh?" he said when they had entered a room and he had turned on the gas. "Well, this is one of my other nests, and to be sure that we will not be disturbed, we will go down to the Castle."

He took a key from his pocket and opened a door at one side of the room; the woman trod at his heels.

They descended some six steps when they reached a portal which had to be unlocked like the former one, and the man led his companion across the threshold.

The door shut behind them like a portal swinging on velvet hinges, and almost immediately the room became revealed, showing a chamber of cramped dimensions, in one corner of which hung a dark curtain, as if it hid something not intended for all eyes.

At one end of this room was a raised dais with a chair in the middle and over it was stretched a red curtain like a banner.

"We need not go into the inner court to-night," said the man, who was handsome, with a sharp eye and a dark mustache which showed signs of having been lately waxed. "You don't want to hear the swish of that infernal tide all the time. It reminds me of the underground river of the 'Uncrowned Angel.'"

"Yes," said the woman, who at the same time removed a veil which up to this time had hidden her face.

It was Amie, the French teacher—Amie, the woman who had told Hiram Hercules all about the finding of Laban Joyce dead in the luxurious library of his magnificent home.

What was she doing in that strange underground place with this man? What had brought her from the home of the dead nabob to a spot where she could almost hear the swish of the restless waters that dashed against the piers of the great city?

But she was there—this woman was; she had waited at the door of the old house on another street for the man with whom she now was and they were alone in the hall of some Order.

Perhaps the Order of the Black Tie!

"How far is it to the river?" said she with a curiosity she could not suppress.

"I will show you. I believe you have never seen the singular trail that leads from here to the water?"

He opened a door in one of the walls of the room and pushed into the narrow passage.

She shuddered and drew back.

"Go on," he said with a slight laugh. "I want you to see where the river is."

They went down the passage together and when she heard the dismal rush of waters which she could not see, she fell back again, but was gripped by his hand and held as in a vise.

"That's it," he said. "It sounds a little like the underground tide used to, eh?"

"It is terrible!"

"You think so because you are a little nervous, that's all. Listen. There is a door between us and the river."

She turned to him and caught sight of his handsome face in the light of the torch he carried.

"You don't mean to tell me that by opening a door you can get to the water?"

"I do. It can be done."

"Where is that door?"

He led her on, but again she drew back.

"There was a time when a thing like this didn't alarm you. You have become childish."

"I haven't forgotten," she answered. "I remember the underground river—the wild rush of the waters that night as they seemed to break through the walls of the mine. It was terrible."

"But that is past history. This is the door."

"Don't open it. The water will rush in and we will be drowned."

"Nonsense. The threshold is higher than the water. I will show you."

He opened the door before which they stood and thrust his torch into the darkness ahead.

A cold wind came in from over the water and sent a chill to the woman's heart.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she cried. "Is that the river?"

"Yes. Look out and you will see lights now and then. Those are boats. Now and then something sweeps by without a light. That is the craft of some river rat on an errand of theft. You seldom hear them. I have stood at the end of this passage and heard the last cry of more than one despairing wretch tired of life. The other night I came down here and found a man lying dead in the passage. He had fallen into the river, but had managed to crawl into the corridor."

"What did you do with the body?"

"I sent it where it belonged—to the water."

"Did you know the man?"

"No. He was one of the waifs of the city. We used to have them in Sundown, you know?"

"Yes, yes."

"Have you seen enough, or would you like to go to the end of the passage and look down upon the water?"

"I would like to see it. You know my curiosity. You will pardon it, but I would like to see—"

"You shall see it all, he said, and the next moment they were moving on again."

They were now in the dark for the man had extinguished the torch lest its glare should betray them.

Amie Gleason, with her gloved hand hidden beneath the folds of her dark dress, stopped at the very edge of the corridor which was several feet higher than the tide and leaned forward.

The river at her feet flowed on with the ceaseless murmur which had been the dirge of thousands of unfortunates.

Now and then she saw a light as it flitted like a will-o'-the-wisp over the water and ever and anon the voices of men came to her ears.

"A person could plunge into the river from this place and disappear forever!" she said, in audible tones.

"I don't know about the latter. The Harbor Patrol might find them."

"But it does not find all?"

"No. There are thousands, I suppose, who have never been found."

He tried to catch sight of her face as the light of an approaching boat for a moment streamed into the place and revealed them side by side there.

He saw that it was tensely drawn and that the eyes were fixed on the water as it swished against the logs, breaking into cold foam and filling the silent night with a sound that drove terror to the listener's soul.

They were under New York; they were beneath the sleeping city of the mystery, and the river was flowing over the next day's tenants of the morgue.

"Come! I have seen enough!" she cried, suddenly turning to him and hastening back. "I don't think I shall ever come here again, but heavens! what a place to hide if one were hunted."

He said nothing, but went back with her, and, unlocking the door, led the way into the chamber where the dais was.

Amie sunk into a chair.

"I've had an adventure," she said. "I have seen the man-hunter."

"You have, eh?"

"Yes. I saw him at the house. He wanted to know everything. He had me on the rack some time."

"What did you tell him?"

"All I knew," she answered, a smile stealing over her face.

"You mean you told him what the Black Tie wanted told?"

She said nothing for a moment, but finding the dark eyes of the man fastened upon her, she turned her head away and murmured:

"Yes, I told him that."

"Well, what did he say?"

"I do not know."

"Look here, woman. You know what you were to do. You know that you belong to us. You must go back. Your station is there."

The French girl rose and stood before him.

"I will go back!" she said, clinching her hands. "I will carry out the orders, and will not fail you. But—"

"Well, what is it?"

"I would like to go home if only for a day."

"You can't—not now."

"I submit."

"Go back. But who is this man? Who is the detective who faced you and wormed from you what you know?"

"I did not know at the time, but I have discovered since. They call him Hiram Hercules; his office is on Broadway."

"Very well. You will go back to your post. What does Portia say?"

"I never saw her like. She says but little. She stands silent in one spot and looks—nothing more. Now and then I see her shut her hands, like a person taking a vow."

"Has she questioned you?"

"But once."

"Well?"

"I knew nothing."

"Yet, when it came to the detective, you knew something."

That same strange smile again.

"You will do, girl. Remember the Uncrowned Angel and its terrible underground river! You will never forget the ride we took on it. It was as dread as Marcia's, on the black colt."

"It was dreadful," echoed the French girl.

"I will go back."

"Now play your hand with the subtlety that becomes you and your race. There is no danger if you are true to the oath and the Order. We are just as powerful here as when we crushed the power of the Nine Nabobs—"

"But the last one was too much for us."

"For the time being," was the reply, accompanied by a laugh. "I will come boldly to the surface in a short time. Up to this moment I have shown my hand in the dark. I am almost ready to come to the surface. 'The Man from Montana' is at the door of his last success."

Annie touched his arm and said:

"I don't know. I may have dreamed it. It seems a dream, yet I was in the Park that day."

"Well, what is it?"

"I saw a woman's face that day that thrilled me. You recollect what eyes Marcia had?"

"Pish! I know what you would say, superstitious, girl," he cried. "There is nothing in it—nothing at all. Don't you know that the horse and his rider were found in Satan's Canyon, the remnants of the vultures' banquet?"

"I know that, but—"

"Come! You can't have such foolish fancies in my presence. You want to go up to the pure air and back to your post."

"They may drag me before the examining court."

"Then, you tell all. Remember."

Amie hung her head.

"But you tell it unwillingly. They get the secret out of you word by word. It must be like taking your blood drop by drop. You understand, girl?"

Amie made no reply. He led her to the upper room; they reached the door and as she stepped into the street she said "good-night" and hastened away with her nails buried in her palms, and in her eyes a desperate look that would have attracted all she met if they could have seen it.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FERRET AND PORTIA.

THE Broadway Sifter, Hiram Hercules, found himself once more beneath the roof which had sheltered Laban Joyce the millionaire.

This time he was there by appointment and it was the fifth day after the tragedy of the Black Tie.

He was alone in the library waiting for the young mistress of the mansion and when the door opened Portia stood before him.

He had seen her before. He had watched her driving in the Park even in the shadow of that strange crime and had seen her in the funeral cab, but now she confronted him, wonderfully transformed, and not at all the woman of other days.

As she came forward she smiled and sunk into the velvet-cushioned arm-chair.

"You are very kind in offering to find out if you can what took my father off, but I cannot accept your offer."

The words seemed to stun the ferret.

He looked at the beautiful girl and saw her lips close firmly behind the words. She was calm. There was no sign of excitement in her mien and she was looking at him with all the coolness of a cool-headed person.

"I must decline to have anything to do with the sifting of this matter," she went on. "I have had enough publicity and sorrow. Let it stop here. After all it may have been a case of heart disease. I know what the newspapers have said about it. I know, too, the verdict of the coroner's jury. It seems to be a matter for the police, but I don't want the matter sifted. I don't want to be dragged into further publicity, as I have already said. It is dreadful enough as it is. I have no suspicions. Let him sleep without having his name continually in the papers."

"But," said Hiram, calmly, "this may not be a matter which you can control, however much you may shrink from further publicity."

"You mean that you intend to take the trail?"

He looked into her white face, but did not reply.

"You must not. For my sake, Hiram Hercules, you will drop the matter, won't you?"

It was the appeal of a lovely creature, and the detective thought of a thousand and one things while he watched the play of intense eagerness and fear on her face.

"I have never yet stepped from a trail until I was at the end of it," he said at last. "I must persist in getting at the bottom of this mystery."

Portia passed her hand over her brow and seemed to reflect.

"I think I know how you look at this matter. You detectives are eager to beat one another. You always strive for the reward."

"No reward has been offered for the solving of this case."

"Indeed? I thought they always offered rewards."

"Not always."

The millionaire's child wheeled her chair to the table and opened a drawer there.

Hiram Hercules saw her take out a check book which she deliberately opened and then picked up a pen.

He said nothing while she wrote and when she handed him a bit of pink paper he smiled and looked at the figures thereon.

It was a check for two thousand dollars.

Hiram politely handed it back to Portia.

"Will you not accept it for services rendered up to date and remain out of the hunt from this time on?" she asked, astounded.

"I will accept nothing."

She tore the check across and cast the pieces upon the table.

"You are determined to drag me back before the public. You will take up the trail and make bad work in the end."

Bad work?

What did she mean?

He thought of what Amie told him—of the figure that came up from the library that fatal night—of the trail it made to her door, and while he looked at Portia he wondered if the French girl had made her story strong enough.

"Very well," said Portia with a sigh. "I can do no more. It is in your hands; but woe to you or any one who harms the man I love!"

"The man you love?" Hiram found himself repeating.

Portia flushed.

"If you must hear that sentence again;—Woe to you if you, in your merciless investigations, cast suspicion on the innocent—if you harm the man I love!"

She stood erect now, towering above him as he sat in the chair like a queen of tragedy.

There were flashes in her dark eyes, there was a red flush on each cheek, and looking down, he saw that the nails had sunk into the white, silken palms.

"I will tell you the truth. I am a betrothed woman. This has been a secret for two. Father did not know it. He might not have approved if I had told him; but it is too late now, and I am my own mistress. I will say no more."

"But how can my investigations harm the man of your choice?" asked the detective.

"Was he in the house that night?"

Portia seemed to fall back, but her hand, opening, caught the back of the chair and she steadied herself.

"You have heard me. You are not my detective. You hunt on your own responsibility. You accept the dangers that may befall you and you will receive no help from me."

She swept out of the room leaving an odor of strange perfume behind her, and Hiram Hercules looked at the door which closed upon her with a smile which he could not suppress.

"A living mystery," he said to himself and aloud. "One of the strangest women I ever met. I am not to solve this crime with her assistance. She will throw every obstacle into my pathway—that's what she means. I have only Marcia to help me and we have the Black Tie to fight."

He waited awhile and finding that Portia was not coming back, he let himself out of the house and stood half-bewildered on the sidewalk.

Night was falling again.

The Broadway Sifter looked up at the millionaire's house and then moved away.

"I don't know who this lover is. She didn't tell me and I didn't see anything of Amie the French girl."

He did not go far, but fell to watching the house.

Perhaps some one would come out or go in.

The shadows deepened; the lamps were lighted and the streets took on their evening garb.

The figure of the ferret did not stir. He wanted to see the door of Laban Joyce's mansion open to let out or admit; he cared not which.

Two hours waned.

At last the portal opened and a female form appeared on the step.

"The French girl!" said Hiram.

Amie looked all around with a good deal of caution before she started off, and when she did, as a matter of course, she had the man-hunter in her wake.

Amie was well protected from casual observation, but Hiram Hercules kept her in sight and

when she turned a certain corner, he was up with her.

He touched her lightly on the arm and she turned to him with a sudden start.

"You?" she cried. "I thought—"

She did not finish the sentence, but the last word died away as she looked into the eyes fixed upon her and her gloved hand stole toward the folds of her dark dress.

"I forgot a question when we were talking in the library," said Hiram. "What is the name of Portia's lover?"

Something that looked like a spark of living fire seemed to leap up into the French girl's eyes.

"Why don't you ask her?" she said.

"I did not like to—a delicate question, you know, Amie."

"True. His name?"

The girl seemed to study.

"It is Gerald—Gerald Green."

"Where does he live?"

"Somewhere on the west side. Stop. He lives on N—street. I know that; but the number I have forgotten. Are you done with me? I don't like you; you took my secret from me, you know."

"You poor miserable fool, you don't know what it is to be hoodwinked," said Amie, looking after Hiram Hercules when he had left her at liberty to pursue her way. "You don't know that you are running your head into the deadliest noose you ever saw. Gerald Green, you are in a pretty tight place, too. I overheard all that passed between the detective and Portia in the house. I know what I am about, but, heavens! what a game it is!"

She vanished. She turned a corner and was lost to view.

Half an hour later she ran up the steps of a house and was admitted.

As for Hiram Hercules, with the name of Portia's lover in his possession, he appeared on the street in question and went to work there.

The Directory had given him some clew to the man's address, and in a short time he was ringing the bell of a well-to-do house.

"Is Mr. Gerald Green in?" he asked.

"He is in his room."

"Will you show me up?"

A look of triumph lighted up Hiram Hercules's eyes when he went up the stairs behind the maid. She knocked at a door.

"Come in!"

The next moment the girl fell back and the ferret stepped forward.

For the first time in his life he stood face to face with Gerald.

A young man of four-and-twenty in smoking jacket held the door open and invited him to enter.

There was the air of open friendship in the greeting he received and when he went forward and took the chair to which Gerald Green waved him, the detective wondered if he knew anything about the sudden taking off of the man of millions.

"You may not know me nor dream of my mission," said Hercules. "I meet you for the first time. I am a detective and my mission is to find who took the life of Laban Joyce."

There was just the slightest perceptible start on Gerald Green's part. He seemed to flush and then Hiram thought he got whiter than usual.

"I am glad you have come. I know the young woman who has been so terribly bereaved," he said. "I believe in sifting these dark mysteries to the bottom and bringing to justice the guilty whoever they be. But I do not see how I will be able to assist you. My acquaintance with Laban Joyce was very slight. I—"

He went hurriedly to the door. A footstep was there.

Hiram Hercules saw him open the portal and the next moment a woman sprang into the room. She stopped in the middle of it with a wild cry for she had caught sight of him and her face was the color of snow.

The detective's look in an instant became a stare of astonishment.

The woman was Portia herself.

For a moment the girl stood and looked at the man of trails.

Gerald Green did not know what to make of her actions for he kept his position at the door and gave her a look of perplexity and wonder.

"You have no mercy!" suddenly cried Portia.

"Men of your stamp are always hunting people with a rope. You don't know what it is to be merciful."

"Portia! Portia!" cried Gerald, at last, darting toward her and grasping her wrist. "This is inexplicable. Where have you met this man before and what is he to you that you accuse him of being merciless?"

"They are all alike! I told him that he was not my detective. I have begged him to quit this trail which can result in no happiness for us, but he would not listen. I did not tell him where you lived, but he is here. Heaven knows how he tracked you down—"

"But I don't have to be tracked down. I am not in hiding. I want to see the guilty punished. I will help this man if I can."

She turned toward him with a startled face.

"You?" she cried. "You help this man of clews? My God!" and before he could catch her she had fallen forward on the floor in a dead faint.

Gerald and Hiram Hercules looked at one another, pictures of astonishment.

CHAPTER IX.

A NEW ALLY.

GERALD GREEN went to where Portia lay and carried her to a chair.

She came back to life and opened her eyes to meet the look of the man of clews and to shudder when she turned away and tried to plead for mercy with her lover.

"Don't tell him anything!" she said, putting out her hand. "Let what we know be our secret. I would sooner go to the river, dread as it is, than tell that man."

"This is very strange," remarked Gerald, glancing at Hiram Hercules. "I am in ignorance as to the meaning of her language. The poor girl must be wandering in her mind."

"What, you turned against me, Gerald?" cried Portia. "What is life to me now?" and she sprang up and would have bounded from the room if his hand had not stopped her.

After awhile Portia, somewhat calm, was led down to her carriage by Gerald, and the detective waited in the room until the young man came back.

"It is still inexplicable," said he. "I never saw anything like this. I don't know what she means and she refuses to tell me."

In spite of himself Hiram thought of the French girl's testimony.

"I want to see the guilty brought to justice," continued Gerald. "I believe that Laban Joyce was strangled by some secret slayer, for the mark of death was found on his throat and the surgeons said he was killed with a cord. I know but little of his past. Perhaps you can enlighten me."

The detective could.

It took him some minutes to tell Portia's lover about the life once led by the millionaire over whose corpse the sod of Greenwood had lately closed.

He went back and began with the reign of the first of the Nine Nabobs of Sundown. He traced their history and told of their tragic deaths as he had heard the tale from Marcia's lips; he told how Diamond Duke, the Man from Montana, had risen to the head of the league against the nabobs, how one by one they had fallen before the Black Tie, how Marcia for taking their part was lashed to a wild colt and turned Mazeppa like upon the cactus barrens to perish by the beak of vulture or the tooth of wolf.

Step by step he followed the career of Laban Joyce, then Major Marmaduke; he pictured the trials held by the Vigilantes; he told everything with a vividness which seemed to come from the lips of an eye-witness; he finished with the sudden disappearance of Diamond Duke and the vanishment of Major Marmaduke, to turn up years later on in New York where he had amassed millions with the cunning and good judgment of a modern Midas.

"But where does Portia come in?" asked Gerald Green at the close of the ferret's story.

"Where did she grow up and where was she while her father played the role of the Ninth Nabob of Sundown?"

"I am going to find out."

"She told me once that she had an indistinct recollection of mountains and mountain camps. She may have been West—"

"But Marcia never saw her in Sundown."

"She grew up elsewhere then. She must have been kept from that desperate capital of the silver hills. Her mother?—What about her?"

"I know nothing of Portia's mother. That, too, is a blank on the page I am filling, but we will get at it by and by."

"I am with you," said Gerald Green, rising and standing before the detective. "This is a dark and desperate trail. I love the young woman who is so troubled and who regards you as an enemy. I would lay down my life for Portia—lay it down at any time. You may command me as you please and the command will be obeyed. I want to get at the bottom of this mystery."

He was in earnest. His manner was firm and eager and as the ferret looked up into his face he saw that the words he had just spoken cost him an effort and that they seemed to be torn from him like a piece of his flesh.

"The girl has a secret," said Hiram Hercules.

"That is evident. She has a dreadful secret."

"You don't know what the French girl saw?"

"No."

"She was in the house that night."

Gerald Green did not speak, but his lips were seen to tremble as he looked at the man of trails.

"I have seen Amie. I caught her in the library the morning after the discovery of the murder. I was there and she came in to look for Portia, she said."

"Well, what did she see?"

Hiram told him all. He repeated the testimony as he had wormed it from Amie, the French

teacher, and for a full minute after the narration Gerald sat spellbound like a man stunned.

"My God! do you believe the girl saw that?" he asked at last.

"That is what she told me."

"Reluctantly?"

"I had to drag the words from her, and several times she refused to proceed."

"I don't believe it!" suddenly cried the young man. "I believe the whole thing a cunningly devised story—a dastardly lie calculated to shield the guilty and hang the innocent. What, Portia take her own father's life? Why should she?"

"Amie said nothing about Portia taking her father's life."

"But the implication! What would she be doing in the library at two o'clock in the morning when all the rest of the house was silent?"

"All asleep but Amie" said the detective with a peculiar smile.

"Yes, all but that serpent!" hissed Gerald.

"I don't believe it, I say. Where is the girl?"

"Still under the same roof with Portia, I presume."

"I will choke the truth from her!" cried the young man. "We might as well proceed to harsh measures first as last. She knows the truth. She is the keeper of the secret—not Portia, though she may have something on her mind which, in her eye, is important and damaging, but which, in ours, would not militate against her."

"Wait," said Hiram, to calm the excited lover. "Let me have my way awhile."

"But the girl may suspect. Amie may take flight."

"I will risk that."

"A moment's delay makes me nervous. Portia under suspicion for this terrible crime? That is a part of the programme."

A moment's silence rested between the two.

"Marcia says that the League of the Black Tie—the same one that existed in Sundown—exists in this city."

"We must crush it out."

"Yes, but it is cunning and powerful."

"It has caught Portia in its net. It is against the girl because she is the daughter of the Ninth Nabob."

"That seems to be it."

"Captain Hercules, you must abate none of your vigilance. All I am worth is at your command. I am at your service in any capacity. The woman I love must not suffer under this terrible suspicion. She must not become the victim of the Black Tie. I know what you would say. I think I know how some of you detectives reason. Everybody is guilty until proven innocent. What testimony have we against her? Nothing but what that French girl told you—nothing but implication. Who knows but that Amie is a member of the Black Tie?"

Hiram Hercules breathed freer when he found himself on the street, after his somewhat exciting adventure in Gerald Green's room.

He turned toward the shop of Shrimp, the cobbler, and reached the door to find it locked and placarded.

The man was gone; he had removed to another part of the city, and had left no directions behind.

The suddenness of this flight rather startled the ferret.

He was not prepared for it, and for a moment he stood and looked at the door with a smile on his face.

Silas Shrimp gone and Feathers dead!

He felt that if Laban Joyce had not been murdered, these two events would not have taken place, and when he went up the stone steps to the pavement he wondered if there would not be other disappearances in the same game.

Feathers had been killed by some one on the street, and he (the detective) had seen his hand, already death-struck, write on the wall the directions for finding Dot, the felon's daughter, but when he came to look for the girl, lo! she was gone, also.

These events put together were enough to mystify the detective and he walked slowly from Shrimp's empty shop while he thought over what had occurred.

Suddenly he stopped.

"I'll look there, anyhow," he said inaudibly and turning a corner he quickened his gait and vanished.

Hiram went almost direct to where he had seen Feathers die.

Of course the body had been found by some one and had been taken to the Morgue.

He found the little door unlocked and when he crossed the threshold which was dark and forbidding he stopped and pressed his hand to his face.

The corpse had not been found.

When Hiram struck a light and bent forward, he saw the body lying on the couch as he had left it.

Death was still doing his ghastly work and the face of Feathers, forbidding in life, was doubly so in death.

But something startled the ferret.

The coat that covered the dead man's back was unbuttoned; the collar had been opened, as

if some hand had been there in search of something, and he saw that nearly every place in the room had been ransacked.

By whom?
Holding the match to the wall, he saw that the rude pencilings which he had seen Feathers trace there had been obliterated.

They had been scratched off as if some one had persistently removed them, and only here and there could he see the slightest trace of pencil marks.

Hiram Hercules felt that there was nothing for him to find in that well-plundered place.

He threw his match to the floor and was about to step toward the door when he heard a sound.

Some one had come to the door itself and he drew back into the darkest corner of the room and held his breath.

Into the place came a figure and stopped between him and the faint light that crept in from the street.

At first the detective thought he stood face to face with a woman, the step was so light, but the following moment he saw before him a man who leaned toward the couch and seemed to study as he could see it among the shadows the bloated body of the jail-bird.

The man slipped forward and began to search the body. The searching eyes of Hiram Hercules saw him run his hands through the clothing like a ghoul, but all at once he drew off with an expression of disappointment.

"I won't come back the third time to look for what ain't here," said a voice. "I looked well the other time and found nothing. I wonder why they haven't found him?"

He turned to the door and the detective let him pass out.

In another second he was going up the steps himself and his eyes were looking for the man who had come down into that room of the dead to search the body of the knife's victim.

Not very long afterward a man who sat at a table gnawing a bone with the eagerness of a half-famished wolf was startled to see his door open and a man stand before him.

"Don't let me bother you," said the one who came in. "Go on and finish your supper."

But the other one did not obey. He dropped the bone and settled back in his chair.

He glared across the table at the man before him and then striking it with his fist, cried out:

"What do you want me for this time? I haven't been doing anything since I came down the last time."

"No; I only want to tell you that Feathers is dead."

"Feathers? Jehosaphat! I know that. I have—I—"

"Yes, you have just seen him lying in his nest dead as a door-nail!"

"Who are you?"

"My name is Hiram Hercules."

"Well, I don't know who killed Feathers. Will that do for a starter?"

CHAPTER X.

THE STARTLING NOTE.

THERE was something about this man that attracted the detective.

He was tall, thin and not bad looking.

"My name is Bloxom—Dick Bloxom," he said. "I have been up twice since I came East. Out there we didn't go up, but you have different laws where you are civilized. We had the noise and the knife for the unruly. We made things hot for the malcontents in Sundown—"

"And you saw the reigns of the Nine Nabobs terminate I suppose?" broke in Hiram Hercules.

The man put his feet upon the table and coolly crossed them.

"Yes, I saw 'em end. But there was one reign that didn't end like the rest. The Ninth Nabob, Major Marmaduke, got the better of the Black Tie, as the opposition was called. He gave it the slip and one morning we woke up and found that we hadn't any nabob nor a head to the opposition. Diamond Duke and his sister were gone."

Hiram Hercules said nothing but let the man have his way.

"Do you want me just because I've been to whar Feathers lies dead?" he asked, leaning curiously across the table and for a moment looking half savagely into the ferret's face.

"No. I don't want you, Mr. Bloxom. I don't intend to disturb you unless you prove troublesome which I don't think you will do."

"You don't know. I'm touchy."

"You were in Sundown while the feud went on?"

"I had a share or so in the Red Wildcat, but I was scratched at last and was glad to get off without being skinned alive. It was a bad go for all of us and when I came away Sundown was at its last ebb and the next year the shanties went up in smoke."

"How came all of you to drift to New York?"

"It's kinder queer we did, but I guess we're all here—all but the Soft-Handed."

"Who was the Soft-Handed?"

"A woman called Marcia—yes, a woman. They gave her a ride—took her out o' camp at night and lashed her to an Injun horse, Mazepa-like, you know."

"And left her to die somewhere in the wild cactus lands?"

"That's just what they did—the men of the Black Tie."

"Was this woman, Marcia, the Man from Montana's sister?"

"Heavens, no!" cried Bloxom with a laugh. "She was a different looking woman. She was smaller than Marcia and had the figure of a fairy. She was but a girl, but I never saw her match with a revolver. She was Diamond Duke's sister; but, strange to say, she disappeared at the same time he did."

"Did they go off together?"

"Yes, they went off—that's it," said Bloxom, with a grin. "People die in that country generally with their boots on. You never heard of such a feud as they had over the Nine Nabobs! It was a fight for power for three years. The Black Tie ruled the roost sometimes, and the Nabobs were now and then on top. But when the ninth one came I knew it was to be a fight to the finish. He was Major Marmaduke."

"Well, did they finish him as they did the rest?"

"No. He played a daring game and one day both Diamond Duke and his sister vanished. They were seen to go into the Uncrowned Angel; but they never came out—that's what the boys said."

"And Major Marmaduke?"

"Of him I know but little," said the man with his feet on the table, but the detective saw over the boots the glitter of a pair of dark eyes.

"You don't know anything about the major's subsequent career?"

Did the man suddenly discover that it was no use trying to deceive the man who was addressing him?

Had he discovered that this keen detective knew something beyond the mere trend of his questions—that even then he knew what he (Bloxom) was keeping back?

The thin-faced man—the man he had tracked from the hovel of the dead—was silent for a full minute.

Then he lowered his feet and leaned across the table, his eyes getting blacker as they fastened upon the ferret, who was as calm as the first flush of a summer's day.

"You've been on the trail before this," he said. "You've been at my heels when I knew it not. I don't know as it's worth while to try to hoodwink you. I don't believe it can be done. I won't try it. Yes, I know something about Major Marmaduke's subsequent career. He is dead now."

"He died as Laban Joyce, didn't he?"

Bloxom nodded.

"Feathers is dead, too. What became of his child?"

"Who? Dot?"

"Yes."

"I don't know."

"You knew he had a child?"

"Yes. I guess I'm the only man who shared that secret with him."

"Did the girl know who her father was?"

"Yes, but not what he was."

"He kept her in ignorance of what he was, did he?"

"Yes; he loved Dot."

"Well, the girl is missing now."

"Dot is? How do you know?"

"I have been to her house. I got her address from the last writing Feathers ever did, but I was a little too late. Dot had gone off with a man."

"What sort of man?"

"I cannot tell you."

"Did she take everything with her?"

Hiram Hercules thought of the "red package" mentioned by Feathers in his writing on the wall.

"I could find nothing in the room."

"Let's go and see."

Bloxom stood erect and eagerness looked out of his eyes.

"Do you mean the red package?" asked the detective.

"Yes. Who told you anything about it?"

"Feathers mentioned it when he wrote on the wall."

"Dot may have hidden it and she may have taken it along."

"Do you know what was in it, Bloxom?"

"No. Feathers never told me, but I saw him write it out. It was very important and he told me, when he finished it, that some day it would be worth its weight in gold either to the police or to Dot."

They went out, the man from Sundown and the detective, and in course of time stood in the little apartment formerly occupied by the dead felon's daughter.

Bloxom with eager fingers and equally eager eyes looked everywhere.

Hiram Hercules watched him and when he came back with disappointment in his eyes, he said:

"She must have taken it with her, eh, Bloxom?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Who could have induced Dot to fly from the place where her father had established her?"

"The Black Tie, man!—the Black Tie!"

"But was Feathers against it?"
"Feathers, as a citizen of Sundown, was against it, or, in other words, he was for the Nine Nabobs. That was enough to seal his doom. That drew him into the shades of death. The black ball dropped for him."

"What do you mean by the black ball?"

"This: The Black Tie have in their secret room a staff surmounted by a black ball. When a life has been forfeited that ball drops. It remains down until the penalty has been paid, when up it goes, to be poised at the top of the staff till another life is taken. It has never failed to record the taking of a life."

"Do you believe it dropped for Laban Joyce?"

Bloxom started slightly.

"It undoubtedly did," he said. "It has dropped for every victim of the Black Tie."

The man from Sundown crossed the room and stooped in one corner.

"I thought I heard a noise there as if some one in an adjoining room was trying to hear us; but I guess not. Shall we go now?"

"In a moment. Tell me about Diamond Duke. You say he and his sister vanished one day?"

"They did."

"Then, who heads the Black Tie now?"

"That is what puzzles me, said Bloxom."

"But it has a head?"

"Yes."

"Who bled Laban Joyce the night he was killed?"

"What's that?"

"Who robbed him of five thousand dollars?"

"You know, don't you? You have been on the trail with the keenness of a true bloodhound. Feathers got the biggest share of the money."

"You helped him, Bloxom. You frightened Laban Joyce, the millionaire, into filling a check for five thousand dollars for you two."

"We did, but the girl, Portia I believe they call her, has more than enough."

"She won't miss it, but the blackmail remains."

Bloxom backed against the wall with the sullenness of a cornered wolf.

He expected to see the revolver of the detective flash in his face, but he saw nothing of the kind.

"You must have had a hold on that man—you must have threatened exposure?" continued Hiram Hercules.

"That wasn't the way we worked him."

"No?"

"We told him that we would see that the Man from Montana did not finish his work here."

"You did, eh?"

"Yes."

"You have just told me that the Man from Montana vanished with his sister in the Uncrowned Angel."

"They did."

"But you lied—deliberately lied."

Dick Bloxom, looking at the detective, was seen to bite his thin lip half through.

"You know that the head of the Black Tie is its old master," said Hiram calmly.

There was no reply, the glance of the confronted man wandering toward the window.

Hiram Hercules advanced a step.

"The man who killed Feathers came back and searched the dead, unless you are the person who did the latter work and obliterated the writing on the wall."

"Before God I did neither! I did not see the writing on the wall. I called to see Feathers and found him dead. I went back the second time hoping to find some of the five thousand, and to look for other things which might be of value to me. I never thought of Dot and if you had not mentioned her to me I would not have recalled his child."

The man of clews saw the trail getting darker than ever.

He saw the thin-faced individual step into the light of the street lamp and pull his hat over his brows.

"You know where to find me when I am wanted," said Bloxom. "I will see if I can find Dot for you. There is something in the red pack. It will give you a clew, for what Feathers wrote and sealed he kept from me."

Bloxom stepped back and was gone.

Hiram Hercules looked after him a moment and then followed.

He went to his own room and opened the door. Everything seemed as he left it, but as he reached the table, his eye caught sight of a note there and he opened it with an eagerness that he seldom displayed.

"I am very sorry, but I am compelled to quit the city and cannot help you any. I don't see what is to be gained by getting at the bottom of this business. It will entail misery on the beautiful and helpless, and, in the end, crush the sunshine from more than one life. If I were you and had the feelings of a man, I would let the whole matter drop. As God is my judge, I write this in the cause of innocence and justice. The end of this trail can be nothing but darkness and death."
GERALD GREEN.

Hiram Hercules read this startling note the second time before he looked up.

"What has come over him since I saw him at his rooms?" he cried. "No! I will go on. I will probe this murder mystery to the bottom—I don't

care who hangs for the murder of Laban Joyce. Come weal or woe, I am forever against the Black Tie!"

CHAPTER XI. IN THE TRAP.

It is the next day.

Marcia the Soft-Handed alone in the room she calls home sits near a table with her face expressive of trouble if not mystery, and her clasped hands, for once ungloved, are white and thin.

We will not go back in the career of this remarkable woman.

We will not trouble her more, by recalling the one event which of the many stands out in her life like a mountain—that terrible ride across the cactus desert with the black colt to bear her company and flocks of vultures overhead and wolves on the trail.

She thinks of it often enough no doubt.

When she is alone, and that is very often, she goes back in memory to that terrible experience, and it is no wonder that her hands shut and her eyes seem to gleam like the orbs of a tigress in ambush.

A thousand times and more this woman has thought of that ride through darkness and beneath a scorching sun.

But that is past; she is now one of the mysterious creatures of a great city, but she is still Marcia, the Soft-Handed.

The sun is high above New York and a flood of light falls over the floor at her feet.

There is a letter on the table, but it is not addressed to her under the name she bears in this romance.

Marcia reaches out and picks it up.

It has just come to her, this letter, and as she reads for the sixth time the brief sentence it bears she smiles and looks toward the door.

"I am in trouble and you said you would come to me when the hour of darkness fell."

"Dot."

"Shall I go?" said the woman, looking up again and throwing down the missive. "Why not let her perish as she is in a net of some kind? She is his child and I—I— No, I can't say that."

Marcia rises and pulls a shawl over her shoulder.

Not often has she been on the streets of Gotham during the day.

She goes out at night, keeping in the shadows of the tall buildings, sneaking through the alleys like she used to creep among the trails of Sundown when she knew that the men of the Black Tie were watching her like a band of lynxes.

But now she goes out.

There is at the foot of the brief letter a number which has not escaped her eye.

It is so small and faint that it would deceive a person less scrutinizing than Marcia; but her eyes let nothing slip.

Dot is in trouble—the Dot of Feathers's last writing on the wall.

From street to street flits the woman, eager to find the girl who had sent the letter.

She goes down into the slums of the city; she flits across streets where after sundown she would not be safe for a moment, and when she reaches a certain spot she stops and looks on every side.

Marcia has no need to recur to the letter for direction for she has fixed its contents in her mind and knows just where she is.

She approaches a house which has an open door and in another moment she has darted into an entrance where she vanishes.

"So you have come, have you?"

Marcia turned and stood face to face with one of her own sex.

The two women eyed one another a moment and the Soft-Handed looked up the long flight of steps as if asking silently if they led to Dot, the felon's daughter.

"This way, please," said the strange creature, and Marcia, following at her heels, was conducted up-stairs to a door at which the woman stopped and laid her hand on the knob.

"She is in there. Walk right in and see her."

Marcia obeyed.

As she crossed the threshold she heard a laugh and the next second stood in the middle of a half-darkened room with her eyes seeming to start from her head.

"I am trapped!" she cried, and leaping tigerishly to the door she seized the knob and wrenched it with all her might, but it seemed made of adamant.

At the same time the sound of footsteps fell upon her ear and she heard a low laugh which confirmed her fears.

Trapped!

The Soft-Handed fell back and looked daggers at the door.

In a moment she had realized everything.

The letter which had decoyed her to the trap was in her pocket, and pulling it out she went to the window and held it up to the light.

She now saw words there she had never seen before.

It was as if some unseen hand had added them

while the letter rested in her pocket, and while she read she grew pale, and felt her heart stand still in her bosom.

She read:

"This is to be a worse adventure than the gallop through Cactusdom. You came out of that game alive, but from this one you will never emerge. Woman, you have lived too long. The mark of the Black Tie will soon be on your throat."

Marcia crushed the paper into a wad and threw it out the window.

She looked down upon the roofs of several houses, and when she grasped the sill she felt a shock which sent her backward, and she staggered across the room almost to the opposite wall.

There was something terrible in the trap to which she had been decoyed.

"The girl cannot be in this conspiracy," she exclaimed. "Dot would not write such a letter, knowing that it would get me into this place. But how did the writer know that I had promised to help Dot? Ah, that is a secret I cannot ferret out."

Marcia walked the floor until, fatigued, she went to a chair which mutely offered rest, and sat down.

Once she thought of writing a note and throwing it out of the window, but she had nothing to write it on, and for a second she gave up in despair.

An hour passed.

The Soft-Handed heard a sound at the door, and then the strange growl of some animal, as it put its nose to the bottom of the portal.

"I am watched by a dog," passed through her mind. "I am guarded by an animal, and when night comes the Black Tie will come, for the ball will drop."

Marcia waited all through that day, the longest but one of her life.

Every now and then the dog, or whatever it was, came to the door, sniffed the air and went away.

She saw the lights of Gotham come out one by one, until the whole expanse below her was dotted with fire.

She stood at the window and looked down upon the city, waiting all the time for whoever was to come to her.

She thought of Hiram Hercules; she went back in thought to the crime of the avenue; she thought of Laban Joyce, the murdered millionaire, and wondered if the keen-witted detective—the man she had promised to help—had struck the right trail.

All at once a key turned in the lock.

Marcia bounded across the room and stopped at the door.

There she stood, her shadow on the wall thrown by the light that stole in at the window and her figure thus revealed to the stars that looked down upon the city.

Wait till the door opened.

She was strong despite her sex.

She was called the Soft-Handed and she could grip a throat and make a fierce fight for life.

The door opened suddenly and something that brushed her sprung into the room.

Marcia, the Soft-Handed, fell back with a half-suppressed scream and looked at it.

A huge dog crouched in the middle of the room and was watching her out of the corners of his eyes.

He was a brindle beast with great jaws and a large head. There was something terribly frightening about him, and the woman who stood there and saw him crouching within a few feet of her wondered when he would leap up and bear her back.

But this did not last long.

The woman in the trap thought of what she had been in Sundown.

Time had not softened her muscles nor broken her cool courage.

She went back until she found the chair.

Lifting it above her head, she advanced upon the dog still crouching on the bare boards and faced him with the energy which is sometimes born of despair.

The animal accepted the challenge.

He growled and Marcia, sweeping the chair low with all her strength, dealt the brute a blow on the head which fairly lifted him from the floor and sent him toward the wall.

She followed up her advantage and dealt another blow which stiffened the animal in one corner and she stood over him with a broken chair, but victorious.

"Now let his master come!" she cried, looking at the door as she stood where she had delivered the last blow.

There was no reply.

The blood that trickled from the broken skull stained the floor and ran, a red rivulet, to Marcia's feet.

She turned back with a smile of victory.

"Let the dog's master come!" she said in a loud voice.

She was answered by a laugh from which she recoiled for it seemed to come from a spot overhead.

Marcia looked up.

There was a face in the ceiling—a face covered with a black mask, but she could see a pair

of gleaming eyes while the laugh still echoed throughout the apartment.

"Coward!" cried Marcia. "You dare not come down and share the fate of your dog. You dare not open yon door and stand face to face with the victim of your trap."

The eyes seemed to get a fiercer gleam and the man laughed again.

"You are to die where you are with the dead for company," he said. "You are not in Sundown, woman. You are not to be lashed to the back of an Indian colt. You have no cactus trails to ride over—no sand to dazzle your eyes. You are in New York; but you are also in the power of the Black Tie."

"In the hands of the Man from Montana, you mean," replied Marcia. "I understand you. But you will find me ready. I have never turned my back upon you and your band. I will fight you here to the end as I would have fought you in Sundown if you had given me the chance."

"You were easily decoyed, eh, Marcia?"

"I was. I allowed myself to be deceived, but by the only sort of note that could have deceived me. I am in your power, as you say, but we will see if I perish here."

She was looking at the hidden face as if she could look beyond the velvet mask and trace the contour there.

Of course it was the face of an enemy.

She knew that it was the hidden face of her deadliest foe—that it belonged to a man who would not hesitate to carry out the meanest revenge of the human heart.

"You thought you were getting along splendidly," continued the voice overhead. "You were in clover—living here as though you had escaped forever the Black Tie. The ball has dropped for you, woman! You are dead to the world."

"Why tell me this when you know that I am in your hands and that you have everything your own way?"

"If you had perished during the ride across cactusdom you would not find a grave here."

Marcia made no answer.

She went to the window, stepping coolly over the dead dog, and looked out.

For a moment longer the eyes at the opening regarded her and then the face vanished and the trap was shut.

Marcia did not move for some time.

Suddenly she drew from her sleeve something that was long and white.

It was flexible, though it looked like a glass tube.

"If I thought I was not to escape—if I dreamed that this was to become my grave—I would swallow the living drop," she muttered. "But there is hope. I will live! The time for the breaking of this tube has not come," and she put it back and once more looked down upon the thousand-and-one lights of New York.

CHAPTER XII.

AN OVER-ANXIOUS SHRIMP.

WHEN Portia reached home from her visit to Gerald Green's room, where she so unexpectedly encountered Hiram Hercules, she was treated to a genuine surprise.

This was nothing less than the absence of Amie, the French teacher, as explained by a note which she found in her dressing-room.

The strange French girl was gone; she had gone away without a word of warning beyond the note, which was not very satisfactory, only saying that she would not return and that it would be useless for Portia to look for her.

The millionaire's daughter had for some days strangely regarded the young girl.

Of late she had discovered a few things which seemed to tell her that Amie had a past which she was afraid would crop out some time when she did not want to appear in her old dress, and that perhaps she would take a notion to go away to escape detection.

Portia did not look much for the French girl.

She had come back from the interview with lover and ferret terribly worked up.

Her nerves were all unstrung and for some time she sat listless in an arm-chair and looked blankly at the wall.

Yes, Amie had stolen from the millionaire's house.

She seemed to have forgotten the injunction of the handsome man who had led her down the underground corridor and shown her the river and its dark waters.

In another part of the city she stood in a room which was the last one on the back floor of a certain house and her face was whiter than ever.

"I guess none of them will find me here," she said. "I've been wanting to get out of their way, for I have seen enough of life and especially enough of the workings of the Black Tie. They don't know me here as the Cactus Belle. I wonder what Portia would have said if she had learned that I can shoot a revolver and lasso a wild steer? I would like to know what she would say if she could see me throw a knife at a target or break a ball thrown high in mid-air. All these accomplishments belong to the Cactus Belle and not to Miss Amie Gleason. But I am out of it at last. I am in no man's power now. I have done my work and they don't corral me again. I was tired of this life a year ago, but

they held me to it. It's all over now. I am safe here."

Amie went to the window and looked down into the cramped back yard beneath her room.

She was squares from Laban Joyce's house. Portia could never find her there and she had resolved not to go out during the day and only at night and then well disguised.

But why was she hiding, and from whom? Was it from the man who had drawn from her the story of her adventures in the nabob's house that fateful night?

Had she fled to escape being questioned in a court of law which might investigate the millionaire's death?

Was she afraid that her testimony would throw suspicion on Portia, her late mistress?

All that day Amie kept the house.

She had pulled down the curtains of the little room she had hired and was waiting in the dark for darkness itself.

Night came.

She told its approach by the sounds in the streets and the gleaming of the lights as they flashed up one by one and when she heard a clock strike eight she stole to the door and put out her head.

No one was in the hall and Amie was hungry.

Drawing a shawl over her head so as to hide more than half of her face, she slipped down and began a supper hunt.

She hardly knew in what part of the city she had located.

She had chosen the place because it looked quiet and was out of the hurly-burly of the metropolis.

Amie flitted underneath the gas-jets until she found a small eating-room which was not very well patronized at that particular hour.

In she went, slipping to the furthest corner where she found a table unoccupied.

With her back to the door lest some one might recognize her from there, she ordered a moderate supper and waited.

Presently there slipped down the narrow aisle a man who dropped into a chair at the table nearest Amie's.

She did not look round, but something told her that she had been recognized.

She heard the man order supper and the voice thrilled her.

She thought of getting up and running from the house. Her blood ran cold through her veins, for the man, though not seen, was as well known as if she had looked into his face.

Her meal came, but she was no longer hungry.

She felt that she must look at the man at the other table; she could not break from the strange power that had her in its grip.

Amie fought the desire to look with all her might, but without avail.

She turned abruptly and found the man looking at her just as she expected.

Their eyes met.

"I thought so," grinned the man. "I would have known you in the dark. May I come over?"

She did not speak.

She knew that she was looking into the face of Silas Shrimp, the shoemaker—the old-time Sandy Silas of Sundown.

He left his meal untasted and came over to her table.

"What on earth brought you to this part of the city?" he went on. "I thought you had a soft thing of it where the millionaire lived. But he is dead, eh? I saw that in the newspaper, and, besides, I heard it from one of the sharps of the streets."

Amie stared at him.

"You don't look much like you did when you were the Cactus Belle. You have still the same eyes and I guess you haven't forgotten how to handle the revolver. There are no steers to lasso here, eh, girl?"

Amie seemed to draw within herself, but all at once she darted forward and her hand, shooting across the table, closed on the man's arm.

"Don't! Hush! This is not the place to talk of such things. All that is past and I am not with them any more."

"How not with them? Not with the millionaires you mean?"

"Yes, yes."

"But have you come to this quarter to live?"

"Perhaps."

"What's—"

Silas Shrimp stopped. Something in the face into which he was looking seemed to tell him to go no further.

"I will tell you more after supper. Go back to your table. I am hungry. I haven't eaten anything since morning. I am nearly starved."

He gave her another look and went back. It was plain to be seen that he had achieved a conquest. His eyes told this. He had found a woman for whom he had been looking for years. He was proud of his catch.

He watched her like a hawk all the time. Amie choked more than once on the smallest morsels of food. She seemed to know that she was under eagle-like espionage and when she finally finished her supper and rose to go, the man rose, too.

"Don't follow me too closely," she said to him with a savage glance. "Let me get the start of you. I must not be tracked home by any one,

but you, and you must not seem to follow me at all."

He nodded, showing that he understood and she went out.

On the sidewalk Amie breathed free for a moment, but when she saw Silas Shrimp her face whitened again and she started back.

"Could I do it and no one be the wiser for it?" she asked herself. "I can decoy him home and there are a thousand-and-one hiding-places just as good as the one I have found."

When she went off she had him at her heels, and when she stopped at the door of the house where she roomed he was near enough to see her enter.

Amie standing in the room waited for Silas Shrimp with the fiendish gleam of a tigress, and when she heard his footsteps on the stairs, she recoiled a space and watched the portal.

He came in with a smile on his repulsive face.

"So this is where you lodge?" he said, glancing about the chamber. "It looks to me like a hiding-place. You haven't things very neat here."

Amie had turned on just enough light to show her the man who spoke.

She did not move toward him, but when he came forward she pointed to a chair and bade him be seated.

Silas Shrimp sat down and crossed his long legs.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Want to see how you were fixed, and how things were going with you and Diamond."

"I know nothing about him."

Amie was looking the man squarely in the face.

"You don't, eh?" and he laughed. "Come, girl. I know a thing or two. I know how the old League is getting along. I haven't been asleep since I turned my back on Sundown and its eight dead nabobs. I haven't been mending shoes all the time, burying my identity on a cobbler's bench. Just think of it. Think of Sandy Silas, one of the best men of Sundown, cooped up in an eight by nine room, littered with leather chips. I've been industrious, but I've been leading a dull life."

"But an honest one, I hope."

"Just as if a cobbler could steal a million or two every few days!" he grinned. "But you haven't answered me. You were in the house when the ball dropped, weren't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Great Jehu! don't you know? You were there when the Black Tie got in its work, and when Major Marmaduke, the last of the nabobs, instead of dying in Sundown, handed in his chips, with millions around him. You were there. I happen to know you were."

Amie was regarding him with the look of a cool-headed creature.

Not a muscle moved now.

"What if I were there?" she said, suddenly bending forward until he saw every flash of her eyes. "What if I were in that house at the time?"

"Nothing, only I wondered how everything passed off. They say the girl what is heiress will have more than a million. Is it so? And will Diamond Duke play his soft hand now that the million is at some one's disposal? That would be striking it richer than we used to in the silver hills. A good pull there would help all of the old gang out, and as for myself, I wouldn't mind a lift in the right direction."

"You must go to some one else with these reflections," said Amie, her lips hardly parting to let out the words. "I know nothing about what you are driving at. I have come here to live, and I don't care to be visited or disturbed."

"You haven't gone back on the Black Tie, have you?"

It seemed for a moment that she would fall upon him with the suddenness of a cyclone.

She took one step toward where he sat.

He was about to spring to his feet, for her look alarmed him, but the next moment something at the end of her fingers flashed in his face.

It was a revolver.

"My God, girl! what are you going to do?"

Amie's lips came closer together.

"I am going to kill you, Sandy Silas! I will not have a man of your ilk to share the secret of my escape from the Black Tie."

"You have turned against it then?"

There was no reply.

"I am going to place this revolver against your head to deaden the sound and then I will send you unsummoned into the presence of your Judge. I am desperate. I have served the Black Tie long enough. I have done its behests too long already. I will not be tracked by any man who for a reward will betray me and hand me over for punishment. I know what the code is. I have broken it. I will not be hunted down by any one."

Silas Shrimp thought of a thousand-and-one things while he listened and at the same time looked into the muzzle of the French girl's revolver.

"Don't move, please. I don't want you to alarm the house by falling to the floor. Look me in the eye, Sandy Silas. Your last moment has come. You will never mend another shoe nor cast another noose."

He bounded up despite the revolver. He tried to seize the hand that held it and then felt his limbs giving way beneath him.

The Cactus Belle had tried to keep her threat.

CHAPTER XIII.

AMIE'S FLIGHT.

WITH a cry like that of a maddened beast Amie bounded over the man who fell back from the flash of her revolver, and went down the stairs.

She believed that she had put an end to a life and her hope was to get away before she could be apprehended.

It was like flying in the dark with everything strange around her, for she did not know that part of the city and knew not whither to direct her steps.

She looked back, but saw no one on her track. She ran on and on, stopping at last out of breath and found herself in the shadow of a building whose open door seemed to afford shelter.

She had gone a long distance from the scene of her adventure with Sandy Silas of Sundown.

She had reached a different part of the city; she had paid no attention to the direction of her flight, but looking up at the building where she had stopped, she thought of shelter there and crept into the open hallway and up the steps that showed themselves.

Above she found a corridor which was dimly lighted and numberless doors which told her that she had entered a building which contained offices and the like.

What was still further overhead she did not know, but could only guess.

Should she go up and see?

She was moving toward the steps when a door at her right opened and looking once at the man who came out, Amie fell back with a cry she could not suppress.

"Merciful heavens!" she exclaimed. "Where am I anyhow?"

The man looked at her bugging the wall in fear and then came toward her.

Well might she wish for the wall to recede and bury her from the keen eyes of that man.

It was Hiram Hercules, the detective.

But all at once a singular strength took possession of the girl's heart.

She went forward; she stopped in front of the ferret and throwing out her hands like a person in the very depths of despair, she cried: "Here I am! You are a detective. I have killed a man. Lock me up."

Hiram Hercules had already recognized the French girl.

He had seen the same dark eyes elsewhere and had listened to her voice in the darkened library under the nabob's roof.

"You don't mean that," he said. "You have killed no one. You are not of the kind that commit murder."

But he took hold of her wrist and conducted her into the room he had just left. He shut the door and turned the key in the lock.

Amie went to the first chair and dropped into it with a sigh of relief.

She was calmer now.

The first excitement had worn off and she regretted that she had spoken the words with which she greeted the detective.

"I was out of my head. I am in trouble. What did I say awhile ago?"

Hiram Hercules looked at her and smiled.

"You accused yourself. You said you killed a man; but of course you have done nothing of the kind."

"You are right. I have killed no one," was the reply. "I have been in trouble. The death of Laban Joyce has unsettled my mind, but I will be stronger after awhile. I became confused on the street. I am stronger already. Will you let me out?"

The detective made no move toward opening his door and Amie looked at him with something of a light of defiance in her eyes.

"What have you found out about it?" she asked.

"Nothing, as yet," he said. "It is going to be a deep, dark trail. We will have to rely on what you saw, perhaps."

"Not against Miss Portia?" cried Amie. "No! there can be no evidence against her—"

"You know what you witnessed that night. You say you saw her come out of the library at two in the morning."

"But she did not take his life. No, she had no reason for committing that crime. When I told you—you forced the terrible evidence from me, you know—I never thought it would be used against her."

"But you don't say now that you did not witness what you told me?"

"I do not, but—"

Amie stopped and clasped her hands.

"If I thought what I saw that night would injure her I would go to the river before I told it in open court," she went on, rising and standing before him.

"There is no need for that, but don't you believe in punishing the guilty?"

"Yes, yes. I believe that the guilty should be punished, but I don't want to see Portia suffer."

Hiram said nothing for a moment.

What fateful wind had blown this young woman into his hands?

Why had she sprung to him saying that she had killed a man and imploring to be locked up for the deed?

"What ever became of your brother?" he asked.

A startling change instantly took place on the girl's face.

It was flushed till then, but now it was white, and the lips had met and were bloodless.

"My brother?" she repeated. "I have no brother."

"Oh, I thought you once had a brother, Duke."

She did not move.

"I must be mistaken or have been dreaming—I don't know which."

"I was an only child and my parents died when I was young."

"A mistake, then? We all make them you know, miss."

But she looked at him still; she did not take her eyes from his face, as if she thought he was playing a game of deception and she wanted to fathom it and see what was beneath the surface.

"I am quite myself again," she went on. "I was all in a tremble when I came hither and hardly knew what I was doing. I will go now."

This time the detective stepped to the door and unlocked it.

He threw it open and watched her as she crossed the step and turned to the stair.

Once when she was half-way down she looked back at him and saw him standing on the landing, not particularly looking at her, though, in fact, he was watching her every movement like a hawk.

"Heavens! what took me to that man's rooms?" she said to herself. "I had no idea I was near him. What was that he asked me about my brother? What does he know about the life at Sundown and about Diamond Duke?"

Amie on the street was still a waif.

At every step she expected to hear a footstep behind her and when she looked back she dreaded the shadow which she felt was on her track.

And the man she had killed in the little house on the quiet street?

Had they found him?

"There is a hiding place," she said. "I know how to get to the passage for he showed me the other night. I can get into the house for I have the key, and, with this tireless bloodhound on the trail, there can be but one ending to this maze of crime and this league against the last of the nabobs."

Amie flitted along with now and then some one turning to look at her, but not to stop her, for she was too fast for them all.

She stopped at last.

In front of her stood a house that had a familiar look. She was compelled to inquire the way to the street which she had gained, but she had reached it and was before the door she had sought.

Everything looked dark and silent about the premises.

Amie produced a key from her pocket and opened the door.

Her hand shut and locked it as she crossed the threshold.

In another moment she had gained the end of the hall and found a door in the dark.

A shudder passed through her frame when she reached an underground chamber and struck a light with a good deal of timidity.

She was in the same room to which on a former occasion she had been conducted by the handsome man who had shown her the corridor leading to the river.

She had never thought to come back to that place so soon and alone, but she was there and in her eyes lurked a terrible determination.

She glanced at the paraphernalia of the place, the dais, the staff surmounted by a black ball, and the curtain shutting off one corner of the room, and then went toward one of the walls.

A door opened at her touch.

Amie's match went out, but she stepped deliberately into the dark and went down an incline until she heard the rush of waters and stood where she could see the lights that were reflected on the nocturnal waves.

There was something cool and terrible in that young girl finding her way to this spot.

It was dark and ghostly and while she stood touching the clammy wall with her delicate hand, she must have thought of a thousand and one things and the past must have risen before her like the action of a drama.

Amie went closer to the water.

She leaned forward and looked out upon the stream and wondered perhaps how deep it was.

Suddenly a light flashed in her face and she drew back with a slight scream.

It was only a boat and then she heard the rough voices of the river rats who were abroad and plying their nightly vocation.

"I wish I could leave something where it would be found," she said. "The stones are too damp to bear any writing and the wind that sweeps into this place would not let anything paper remain."

She turned back to the river again.

"Why didn't I tell him the truth? Why didn't I tell Captain Hercules all I know? I can go back and find him, but what if they should arrest me for the murder of Sandy Silas?"

She stopped again.

"I will go back. I won't take my own life here, but I will tell the truth and maybe there is hope for me yet."

She turned and went back up the corridor.

"Heavens! the door must lock from the other side!" she cried, falling back from the portal in the dark. "I can't open it at all!"

It was true. She was cooped up in the corridor between the river and the chamber of the Black Tie! She was an underground prisoner between two deaths.

Amie lighted a match, but the wind soon blew it out; she tried another with no better results.

"There is only one way out of this," she cried. "I must go to the opening and hail a passing boat."

She went back toward the river again. She stopped at the mouth of the passage and waited with the cold wind chilling her very bones and fear at her heart.

More than an hour passed. Now and then a boat came close enough, but the voices of its occupants filled the French girl with fear and there was no cry for succor from her lips.

At last a boat came so near that Amie drew back with a cry of alarm.

A lantern was flashed in her face.

"It's the same old hole that has mystified us before, Jack. But— Hello! what's this?"

It was Amie hugging the wall with her face the hue of death and her eyes fastened upon the man who had turned his dark lantern into the corridor beneath the pier.

"By my soul! here's a woman."

The girl leaped forward. She showed herself to the rats in the boat and begged to be taken off.

In another moment she was moving from the place.

She sat in the stern of the boat which was well laden with stolen goods and was carried down-stream while the two men looked at her as if they had found a prize.

Once more she was on the streets.

She looked about her and hurried off.

Whither should she go now? Back to the detective's den?

No, she no longer thought of carrying out the resolve taken in the underground corridor. She had something else in view. Perhaps after all she had not killed Sandy Silas. And she might yet escape the revenge of the Black Tie and live.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE INVISIBLE BLACK TIE.

HIRAM HERCULES regretted that he had let the French girl get away.

He had been told something of her past by Marcia, the Soft-Handed, and knew that in the far West, among the shanties of Sundown, she was the Cactus Belle and had played an important role in the drama of the Nine Nabobs.

He saw the girl vanish with feelings of regret, we say.

He wished he had held her captive a while longer, but it was too late now, and refusing to growl over the blunder, he went back to his room and thought out the next move in the game.

The singular letter received from Gerald Green astonished him.

That Portia's lover should be so eager to have ferreted out the hand that took Laban Joyce's life, and the next moment try to dissuade him from sticking to the trail, was, to say the least, dark and mystifying.

Gerald Green must have had a revelation of some kind.

Was it possible that he knew something about the events of that night of murder? Had he heard from Amie's lips the same story she had told him?

Hiram Hercules could not think so.

He thought of the scene when Portia found him at Gerald's rooms.

He recalled the girl's excitement as she begged her lover not to have anything to do with the detective's trail, but he (Gerald) had assured him that he should have his assistance in every move toward sifting the matter to the bottom.

But he had turned his back upon him; Gerald was not in the hunt at all now.

Hiram Hercules was alone; he was pitted against what was known as the Black Tie—the Order which had left its deadly mark on Laban Joyce's throat.

There was something thrilling in the game, something which he, with all his acumen, could not get at.

Gerald Green's disaffection was, to say the least, suspicious.

It was against Portia.

Look which way he might, there was no escaping this matter.

Gerald must have had another interview with the girl; they must have been together and Portia had taken him from the game.

There seemed no other explanation, yet this was not the right one.

The reader will remember that Gerald wrote that he was compelled to leave the city for a spell; but this was a downright falsehood and all the more astonishing because it came from him.

He had not left New York.

If Hiram Hercules had gone to his quarters for a fuller explanation of his change of heart, he would have been told that Mr. Green was not in the city, but that he would be back ere long—an answer which would have been quite indefinite.

But the detective did not seek the young man for an explanation.

Just at this particular moment he was bent on finding Dot, Feathers's daughter.

He remembered his failure to find her when Bloxom conducted him to the place where she had lived, how he had been told by the virago in charge of the house that she had gone off with a man, and how he had pitied the other girl seen there—the white-faced one who told him that her name was Miss Acton.

Hiram Hercules left Amie to seek safety in flight, while he bent his steps toward that part of the city where he had lost Dot, and in a short time stood near the house.

There was a light in one of the upper windows and by watching it awhile he caught sight of a young woman in the room.

Presently the door of the house opened and there came out a figure which looked like the virago's.

By following the woman a few steps the ferret saw that it was indeed her and then he went back.

Entering the house which had not been locked by the person who had just left it, he made his way to the upper landing and knocked lightly on a door.

It was unlocked and then opened.

He stood face to face with Miss Acton.

The young girl fell back with a slight cry, when she seemed to recognize him, and stepping into the work room, he stood before her and begged her pardon for the intrusion.

"I know what has brought you back," she said. "You have come to ask me about Dot."

"That is it. I have come to inquire about her."

"How did you get into the house without being seen? Is she gone out?"

"I saw her quit the house."

"That woman has the tongue of a viper, the hand of a fiend," said the girl. "I am in dread all the time and sometimes I envy Dot her situation no matter what it is."

"Who came for Dot?"

"I don't know. I only know that she went off with a man. He came for her. I caught sight of his figure on the stairway as he was escorting Dot down. Mrs. Viper pushed me back into the room and shut the door in my face. But here is something for you."

Molly Acton took from her pocket a letter which she handed to the detective.

Hiram looked at it and then into the sharp, pinched face which would have been beautiful but for the traces of sorrow thereon.

It was a scrawled letter and at the bottom of it was the name "Dot."

"Do you think this came from her?" he asked.

"Don't you see the name at the bottom of the sheet?"

"Yes, but is that Dot's signature?"

Miss Acton looked at the ferret surprised.

"What do you think?" she asked. "It came to me not through the post-office, but was found poked into my room underneath the door this very morning."

Hiram turned to the letter again and read it through.

It was an appeal for help. The writer seemed to be in trouble, said she was watched all the time and begged her friend, Miss Acton, to show the letter to the police and, if possible, tell the man who sometimes came to see her.

"You haven't told the police, have you?" asked Hiram.

"No, I couldn't get out of the house. I was watched myself and by Mrs. Viper, as I call her."

"Yet who could have brought the letter to the house?"

"That is the mystery. Last night while I lay awake I thought I heard some one on the stairs, but it seemed a dream until when I awoke and found the letter under the door. That looks somewhat like Dot's handwriting, but it must have been penned under difficulties as you can see by the shape of some of the letters."

"But the man who came to see her sometimes? You have just spoken of him."

"I saw him but once and that was enough. He was repulsive looking, had but one eye and a scar over the other one."

"Do you think he was Dot's father?"

"That man? Mercy, no!" cried Miss Acton. The detective smiled.

"Did you ever hear Dot say anything about her father?"

"Never. Dot had secrets, though. She had a red package which she used to look at and

which she once told me she would never part with, no matter what happened."

"Was it sealed?"

"Tied with a cord and sealed besides."

A minute later Hiram Hercules stood before the girl and looking at her, said:

"You can tell me nothing more about Dot?"

"I am sorry I cannot."

"You don't like this place?"

"I don't, but it is the best I can do. I have been here for three years and two of them Dot has been my friend and companion. Dot is refused. There is good blood in that girl's veins. She shouldn't have crossed the threshold of a house like this. That one-eyed man her father? I don't know what to think since you have put such an idea into my head. I fear I shan't sleep to-night."

The detective bowed himself out and walked away.

All at once he stopped nearly a square from the house and went back.

At that moment a man passed him.

In an instant the eye of the ferret was following that man, the face of whom he had seen in the glare of the lamps.

"That face resembled one I saw among Marcia's photographs," he said. "She called the man Diamond Duke and said he was the Man from Montana, the head of the Black Tie."

Hiram Hercules started after the man.

With the tread of the cat he trod in the man's tracks and nearly touched him as he turned the nearest corner.

If he was the head of the Black Tie, he did not suspect pursuit for he did not look back.

Suddenly back he came toward the trailing detective.

Hiram flitted on like an ordinary pedestrian.

They met in the shadow of a block and their garments touched.

All at once the detective found himself thrown against the building by some strangely magic power.

It seemed to him that a hand which he could not resist had pushed him aside and the next moment he felt something close round his throat and he gasped for air.

All this did not take up the half of a second, yet it was the most terrible experience in his life.

In another instant the man was gone, but the strangling sensation was still there and the detective was gasping for breath against the building toward which he had been thrown.

Was this the Black Tie?

With a mighty effort Hiram Hercules plunged forward to tear an imaginary band from his throat.

The near lights swam before his eyes, and his throat seemed on fire wherever it had touched him.

"In God's name, what infernal trickery is this?" he cried. "It was not a hand that touched me, but it felt like the cold skin of a snake, and I still feel it throughout my body. That man was the head of the secret clan. That was the Man from Montana—Diamond Duke of Sundown! I have encountered face to face the person I have to fight. I have felt the Black Tie's grip."

He started after his assailant, but stopped and felt faint.

There was a terrible something which no language can describe, tearing at the inside of his throat.

It was as if the cold coil was still encircling his neck, tightening all the time, and surely stifling him, though no enemy was in sight.

Hiram Hercules was too far from his own den to go there and try to fight off the monster which was grappling him in this mysterious manner.

He wondered if this had been Laban Joyce's last experience.

He thought of a thousand things while he staggered from the spot, watched by half a dozen men, who wondered if the detective had not taken a drop too much in some rum resort.

"I must have help. The coil tightens! It is invisible, but dreadful all the same. It is killing me. I have felt the closing of the Black Tie!"

Hiram Hercules reached at last a door which filled him with sudden hope.

He bolted at it and threw it open.

Beyond it was another door, and in it a light.

"Here! I am dying!" he cried, rushing into a small office and confronting a man who sprang up as he crossed the threshold.

He threw his hands to his throat and cried out that something was choking him to death.

Doctor Grimsby looked first at the throat, and then a long, steady look at the man.

"I see nothing," he said. "You are unnerved. You have been drinking, man, and you need—"

"I need some hand to tear off the coils of the dread Black Tie," was the answer. "I met its head on the street. In a moment I was thrown toward the buildings, and the Tie touched me. I am Hiram Hercules, and am on the trail of the guilty. I am a detective. Look, doctor. You must see something at my throat. Where is your looking-glass? Ah!"

The detective had found the office mirror, and a spring brought him before it.

The next moment he uttered a loud cry.

There was a black band on his throat, under the chin!

Doctor Grimsby stared, too; he had caught sight of it as well.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FERRET IS WARNED.

THE powerful lotion applied to the detective's throat by Doctor Grimsby, who seemed to see that it was a case of life and death, stayed the march of the grim destroyer and after awhile Hiram Hercules went out into the cool air of night.

He felt that by a hair he had escaped the deadly powers of the Black Tie—that by a miracle, as it were, he had managed to cheat for the time being the hand from Sundown, and when he started off he saw no one watching him and seemed to have no one on his track.

The reader can imagine what his thoughts were when he went back to the little room on Broadway where he had lately separated from Amie, the French maid.

He was not long there.

A burning desire to see Marcia, to tell her that he had felt the cold touch of the Black Tie, led him from the place and once more he was threading the mazes of the city's streets.

But he did not find Marcia at home.

He knew nothing of the adventures through which the Soft-Handed had passed since their last meeting.

He knew nothing of the dog and the decoy letter, nothing of the masked face which had looked down upon the woman from the ceiling of the room in which she stood. If he had known these things he might have looked elsewhere for Marcia, the Soft-Handed.

It was nearly midnight when Hiram Hercules turned up near Laban Joyce's late home.

He knew that Portia was there; he knew that from the house had lately been carried the body of the millionaire, that man who had lived a double life, inasmuch as while he was Laban Joyce he was also the last of the Nine Nabobs and that the Black Tie was on his track.

It was not his intention to disturb Portia at that hour.

He wondered if Amie had come back to that house of mystery. He looked up at the windows and thought of a good many things, all of which were connected with the lives of the characters of the dark drama of which he was an important part.

Looking at his watch, he noted that it was just twelve, and thinking of the striking of the clock which had roused Amie the night she listened in the millionaire's house, he involuntarily listened for the same measured strokes.

But none came.

Ten minutes passed and the clock was still silent.

Hiram Hercules thought this very queer as the night was still and clear, and he could not have missed hearing the strokes if they had sounded.

Just around the corner was a little all-night store which had for its occupant at that very moment a queer-looking old man who dozed on a chair in one corner of the room.

He opened his eyes when the figure of the ferret came in and made a noise at his right.

Hiram looked at the clock ticking over the counter and purchased a cigar.

"What's the matter with your clock on the other Square?" he asked. "I have been debating whether I heard it to-night and to settle the question within myself, have dropped in to consult you."

The old man laughed.

"You wouldn't hear it if you were to listen till morning. It doesn't strike any more."

"Why not?"

"It's been out of repair for more than a month and they don't seem to care if it strikes or not."

In an instant the detective thought of what Amie told him about that very clock striking two the night of the death of Laban Joyce.

"Are you sure of that?" he asked.

"Certainly. I've been keeping store here more than a year, and it was doing good work till about a month ago when it got out of fix. Since then it's been as silent as the grave."

That was something, and the detective's countenance underwent a change which the old man did not see.

His discovery told him that Amie, the French girl, had deliberately lied.

He never called things by soft names. She had uttered a falsehood, having told him that she heard the clock strike two when Portia came up the stairs from the library where the millionaire was murdered.

Hiram went out and walked slowly toward the nabob's house.

He stood there more than an hour.

He was waiting for that clock to strike, but the steeple was as silent as a tomb and no sound came from it to confirm Amie's words.

Late as the hour was he saw the front door of Portia's home open and a figure, well veiled, slip out and take off down the pavement.

"Amie!" said Hiram under his breath. "The French girl came back and is out again."

For him to follow that sitting person was no trouble for he had followed people before, and when he saw it move toward the other side of the city he glided on and at last tracked it to a house to which he, as yet, had followed no one.

The veiled one was admitted.

Hiram Hercules fell back and began another watch; he felt that in time the door would open and let the person out.

Against his cheeks blew the cool air of another day. Now and then he felt a thrill of cold on his throat as if the Black Tie was coiling there once more, but it soon passed away, each recurring time becoming fainter and fainter.

But the door of the place he watched did not open.

The detective at length went over to the house and looked up at the windows.

He was near it when he heard a key click in the lock and the next moment the person he had tracked to it came out.

At the same time he caught the glimpse of a face in the hall and letting the tracked one move out of sight, the detective went up the steps and boldly rung the bell.

He heard footsteps in the hall and when the door was opened, he pushed forward.

There was a cry as a man fell back from before him and he stood face to face with Gerald Green!

Discovered at last!

"You beat the devil," said Portia's lover, glancing at the detective. "You have been on my track and I wrote you that I wanted nothing more to do with this death mystery."

"But you want the guilty punished, don't you? You told me when we last met that you were at my service. I got your letter. You threw it over my transom, didn't you? Well, no matter how it reached my room; I found it on my table. The woman who just left this house—the French girl—may get you into serious trouble, Mr. Green—"

"The French girl?" broke in Gerald Green. "That was Portia!"

"Portia herself?" cried the ferret. "That is worse yet. This is decidedly compromising. Think a moment. You know what Amie says she saw the night of the crime. You suddenly withdraw from the hunt for the guilty. You know that the French girl by implication accuses Portia of crime, yet you hide yourself in this house and refuse to protect her if she is innocent."

"I will hear nothing more!" cried Gerald. "I will give you no information, only I want to say that it would be best for you if you quit this case at once. You don't know what you are doing, Captain Hercules. You cannot know the sorrow and suffering a successful hunt may entail. I dare not think of it."

He passed into the nearest room followed by Hiram Hercules and pale to the roots of his hair.

"This is something dreadful. Look here. Portia knows nothing of the past; she does not know that her father was leading a dual life in this very city—that, while he was Laban Joyce to thousands, to others he was Major Marmaduke, the last of the Nabobs of Sundown—a man whose life was as dark as the lives of such men usually are. Don't you think it almost a lucky stroke that he was taken off when he was? I do."

"Then you are willing to let the murderers escape?"

There was no reply.

Hiram Hercules thought of his narrow escape from the touch of the Black Tie.

"You are willing to compromise that beautiful girl by holding midnight meetings with her," he went on, while Gerald Green did not speak. "If I had thought I was tracking her to this house, I would have stopped her. But I thought I was watching Amie, the French teacher."

"I wish I could see this girl," cried the young man, turning suddenly upon the detective. "Where is she?"

"I cannot tell you."

"That girl is a mystery. She is a serpent, yet a woman. She tells a lie when she says she saw Portia come out of the library that night while the clock in the tower struck two. There is no clock in that tower."

Had Gerald Green been doing a little detective work on his own hook? Had he been on the trail himself since the exciting interview with Hiram Hercules?

"Granted!" said the detective. "Granted that the clock did not strike that night. The girl may have been so excited as to believe that she heard it."

"I don't believe that either."

"Then, why does Portia want me to quit the trail?—why do you ask me to give up the work not half finished and let the guilty escape the halter?"

They were standing face to face, these men were, and Hiram's hand had fallen upon the young man's arm and was resting there.

The questions were direct and there was no avoiding them.

"I refuse to answer!" said Gerald Green, deliberately.

"Do you know that I may answer for you one of these days?"

"I know what you mean. You intend to stick to this trail and to find out all you can even against my wishes."

"You are right."

"Then go ahead, but I will not be responsible for what happens. I will not give you a particle of aid or encouragement."

"You wrong Portia by such language."

"Do I? And you darken her life every move you make."

"You were not of this opinion a few days ago."

"I know that."

"You have changed your mind. You are against justice. You may be shielding the guilty."

"What's that?" cried Gerald Green, stepping forward with clinched hands. "Shielding the guilty? If you mean Portia, I will shield her with my life. Don't you know that on Laban Joyce's throat was a black mark which the surgeons said had to do with his death?"

"It was the mark of the Black Tie."

"I thought you would say that. Laban Joyce was the last of the Nabobs. The man was hunted by the Black Tie, which failed to get rid of him thousands of miles from here. It was a hunt to the death."

"As mine shall be!"

A derisive smile lingered for a moment at Gerald Green's mouth and his figure was drawn up as he seemed to fall back toward the wall.

"Remember! I am not in this hunt with you," he said. "I am out of it. I will not aid you. I will not do anything that will bring success to your hanners."

"You are determined to destroy the woman you profess to love."

"Just as you please."

The answer was cold and full of sinister motives. The lips of the speaker curled proudly.

Hiram Hercules drew toward the door, but from the portal looked back at Gerald Green.

"You thought Portia was the French girl, eh?" Gerald laughed. "Amie is no longer an inmate of Portia's home. The little serpent has crawled from that Eden forever. Ha! ha! I will have a good joke for Portia when I see her again."

There was something so terribly cruel in the tones that even the detective shivered when he thought of the beautiful Portia trusting her love to this young man.

He was in the hall when he heard the door open, and the face of Gerald Green confronted him.

"I warn you for the last time! If you persist in dragging Portia into this game—if you keep on the way you are going now—there will be a death more terrible than that which took Major Marmaduke out of the world."

Hiram Hercules looked at the speaker like one stunned.

Was the man mad?

Then the door closed and he went out into the night air like a person in a maze.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BLACK TIE AT WORK.

If Amie, the French girl, had gone back to the scene of her encounter with Silas Shrimp, she would have discovered that she was not a murderess.

Her bullet had missed the face of the man from Sundown, and while she was on the stairs, fleeing for her life as she thought, he was picking himself up and congratulating himself over his narrow escape.

There was a grin on the cobbler's face, and when he discovered that the shot, though fired within three inches of his head, had taken off nothing worse than a lock of his sandy hair, he was overjoyed, and quickly left the house.

While Hiram Hercules was having his interview with Gerald Green, the familiar figure of the cobbler might have been seen sneaking through an alley. It stopped at last, and lifting the latch of a poor door, vanished, and was at home.

Sandy Silas was a man noted in other climes for his coolness under fire, and certainly he had displayed a good deal of it while confronted by the determined girl bent on taking his life.

He was no longer a shoemaker. The little bench at which Hiram Hercules had surprised him was not in the house to which he went from Amie's hiding-place, and he was no more the cobbler of New York.

"To think that I should be shot at in this city by the Cactus Belle!" he ejaculated with a laugh, as he looked at his face in a cracked mirror. "It's queer, ain't it? She evidently thinks she's finished me, and it might be well to let her think so. But I'll try my hand now in another direction. I'm in need of cash. I'll see what I can do toward raising the wind."

He opened a chest and took out a suit of clothes better than those he had on. He donned these and when the operation was complete he presented an appearance for the better.

Sandy Silas left the place. He went back to the shadows along the houses, but now and then

he came boldly out into the light and walked there like an honest citizen.

"I never will get used to these streets," he said. "They're not like the trails of the Vulture Mountains where I used to travel all day and never tire. Besides, one has to work for his living here. No breaking a lump of quartz and picking up enough to live on for a week. It's not that way here. But the old gang is here, I guess I know them all and the last of the Nabobs—Well, that was a cool play, but a deadly one, and the hand that held the trump, played the game out as they said it should be played the night they stood in the mine and swore the last oath of the Black Tie."

He stopped at last, this man did, and knocked at the door of a house which after a moment's silence was opened to him.

He went in, passing a man who looked at him as he passed under a jet.

"Well, where did you spring from?"

Sandy Silas was confronted by a handsome man the upper part of whose face was covered with a black velvet mask.

"I've been in the city for some time, as you know, captain," was the reply. "I thought I would drop round and see how things were going."

The eyes behind the mask watched Silas Shrimp closely for some time when their owner said with a light laugh:

"They tell me that you've turned shoemaker."

"I've been a Jack of all trades since I struck the city. I had to make an honest living somewhere and in some manner, and why not at the bench and here?"

"Yes, but you never cobbled in Sundown."

"Not much, but it's not hard to learn and, then, I didn't care whether I got much trade or not."

All this time the black eyes were regarding Silas. He became uneasy.

"Captain Duke," he said at last, "I'm desperate. I want some money."

"You do?"

Silas rose and turned his pockets wrong-side out.

"You can see for yourself. I am out of money. I never was a man on whom fortune smiled very hard, but now I'm at the very foot of the ladder and I don't know where the next breakfast is to come from."

The masked man's eyes looked at the clothes worn by the speaker and then seemed to study his face.

There were no particular signs of suffering anywhere, still, a man may be at the foot of the ladder and not show it very plainly.

"I'm no millionaire," said the masked one at length.

"I know that, but—"

Silas Shrimp stopped.

"You are in a fair way to make something. You haven't been starving since you left Sundown."

"No, that's a fact, Silas. Neither have you."

One of the white, smooth hands of the last speaker dived into a pocket and a roll of bills was brought to light.

"How much will help you, Silas?" he asked without looking up.

"I leave that to you, captain."

Several bills were counted out and tossed upon the table. Sandy Silas picked them up, but as he did so he caught the eyes of Captain Duke and his hand seemed to fall from them.

"You complete the bargain when you touch those bills. Remember!"

"What bargain?"

"You become one of us."

The man fell back.

"Do you mean that I become one of the Black Tie when I accept this money?" he cried.

"You do. See! You have touched the bills!"

Sandy Silas stood erect, looked down into the glittering eyes of the man in the chair.

"It is too late," continued the masked man.

"You are at last one of us. You knew we were here. You knew where to find me and by the act of accepting help from me you become one of the League of the Black Tie."

The next moment the door opened and three figures presented themselves in the middle of the room.

All three wore masks and were men, tall and handsomely proportioned. They were dressed in mountaineer costume and wore belts of buckskin in which stuck the revolver and bowie-knife of the mines.

Silas fell back and, with the money falling from his hand, looked at the trio with eyes that seemed ready to fly from his head.

"These brethren of the Black Tie are witnesses of your compact with us," said the masked leader. "Silas, you belong from this moment to us as you once belonged to the Nine Nabobs in Sundown. There you betrayed your masters, but would not join us. We have bided our time. You are one of us at last!"

Silas said nothing.

His limbs seemed to give way beneath him and at last he went to the table with an oath and cried out that he would accept the change and become one of the Black Tie.

In an instant the three men wheeled and passed out.

Sandy Silas looked at the man still at the table and then at the money he had dropped.

"From this night your life changes," was the next sentence that greeted him. "You need not hide from any one any longer. You may go back to your work-bench, if you wish, but you are with us and you will obey all orders that may come to you. Come with me."

Silas was led from the room; they passed down a flight of steps at the end of a corridor and into a chamber where he saw a raised dais, a black staff surmounted by a ball of the same color, and, lastly, a curtain in one corner.

"This is the Castle of the Black Tie. Not much like the secret court of the Uncrowned Angel, eh?" laughed the cobbler's conductor.

"We meet here. We come to this place for consultation and to see the ball drop. You know what was said in Sundown, Silas—that whenever the ball of the Black Tie dropped a nabob died."

"Yes."

"This way now. I want to show you the 'traitor's walk.'"

The masked man opened a door in the wall and Silas got a whiff of the river.

"My God! it's the river, isn't it?" he cried.

"No, it's the tide of death!" was the reply.

"Do you want to see what lies at the end of the walk?"

"I'd rather not."

The door was shut and Silas was conducted back to the room where he had been initiated into the League of the Black Tie and left there alone.

He waited ten minutes, but no one came. Then he moved toward the door and found it open.

It was but a few steps to the street and he took them, all the time dreading to try to get out, lest he would feel at his throat, as he knew others had, the coil of the Black Tie.

But he went out.

He found himself on the street again with a strange, undefinable feeling.

There was a sense of dread and insecurity which he could not shake off.

"Why did I go to him for money?" he said to himself. "I was a fool, but I won't go further with this thing. I will go and bury myself till the whole game is played out! What if this detective wins? What if Hiram Hercules, the man who is on the trail of the last Nabob's murderers, finds out everything?"

He turned back to his hovel.

He was almost sure that he had not been tracked to that place by any one.

Since giving up his shoe-shop he had buried himself among the slums of the city and had never dreamed that he would become a full member of the Black Tie—the dread Order whose operations he had witnessed nearly across the continent.

Sandy Silas of Sundown crept home with dread in his heart and a dozen resolves uppermost in his mind.

He shut the door carefully behind him. He had been gone some time, but no one had called during his absence.

He struck a light and was lighting the lamp on the rickety table when a noise startled him and he looked over his shoulder.

"Great Scott!" he cried. "When did you come in?"

A human being was crouching in one corner of his hovel.

He saw the keen black eyes and the beautiful face which fear could not rob of its contour.

"I came in awhile ago. I did not know who lived here, but I think I have seen you before. You knew Feathers, didn't you? I have escaped from prison. I am in peril. I can't tell you what I have seen nor where I have been. You won't betray me, will you? They have robbed me of the red package. They have plundered me and I have no place to hide unless you take me in."

Sandy, with the match still blazing in his dirty hand, leaned toward the speaker and regarded her in silence for a moment.

"You are Dot, aren't you?" he asked.

"I am Dot, that is all. I was taken from where I lived by a story which completely deceived me. They said Feathers was dying. They told me that he wanted to see me once for all and I went. I was deceived. I found myself in a trap from which I have escaped, I hardly know how."

The eyes that watched the white-faced girl fairly gleamed.

Sandy Silas laughed to himself. He saw that the girl drew off and was looking at him with fear.

"It was all a lie!" she went on. "It was all done to rob me of the red package."

"I don't know about that. One part of it is true. Feathers is dead."

That moment she started and a cry pealed from her throat as she threw up her hands.

"Dead!" she cried.

"Dead! Feathers was killed."

Sandy Silas had no nice way of breaking disagreeable news.

Dot seemed to sway from him in the light of the lamp he had just touched with the match.

"Dead? Then I am alone in the world. I have no friend on earth. I have lost the red package which I was to keep till I was nineteen. I am in the wide, wide world, penniless, friendless and surrounded by enemies!"

She sunk limp and nerveless to the floor; the agile figure of Sandy Silas sprung toward her, but as he stooped to pick her up he heard a voice that startled every nerve.

"Don't touch that, woman! It is the command of the Black Tie!"

He looked up and fell back with a cry that rung through the hovel, and looking down at Dot thought her dead in the glare of his one poor lamp.

CHAPTER XVII.

PICKED UP ON THE STREET.

SANDY SILAS realized that he was truly in the grip of the Black Tie.

As he looked down upon the figure lying at his feet and heard the command not to touch the girl ringing in his ears, he felt that to disobey the order would result in something direful to him; he knew not what to do.

He had been a sharer of Feathers's secret that Dot was his child and she had escaped from some trap and had come to him for help.

He looked at the window, but saw nothing.

If the speaker was outside he could not catch a glimpse of his face, yet he knew that he belonged to the Black Tie, and that perhaps he (Silas) had been tracked from the house where he had been initiated by Diamond Duke himself.

He went to the door at last and ventured to look out.

Everything was dark just beyond the portal, but he thought he made out a figure standing near.

Sandy Silas drew back without alarming this person and looked again at the girl on the floor.

"She can't lie there, that's certain," he said to himself. "I will have to get rid of her in some manner. It wouldn't be right to let her die where she is. If she will come to she can go out and look for other quarters."

He assisted the slightly revived girl to a chair and saw her come slowly back to life.

When she was sufficiently recovered to understand him, he told her that she could not remain there.

"Then I will go, but I will have those men on my track again—I know it."

"What men?"

"Those who took me off with the lie they had coined."

"The ones that told you Feathers was sick and wanted to see you?"

"Yes."

"Well, as I have told you," said Silas, looking straight at the girl, "Feathers is dead."

She turned pale again, but did not move.

"I am ready to hear anything now. They took the package from me. I cannot open it when I am nineteen, which will be in a few days."

Silas was afraid all the time that the command which had startled him would be repeated, and so he took Dot by the hand and led her to the door.

"You are going to send me out into the streets, are you?" she asked, an imploring look in her eyes.

"I have no place to keep you. You see that yourself, Dot. I can't harbor you when my own life is in danger."

"But you knew him?"

"Yes, I know Feathers. I knew him well, and it would have been a good thing for both of us if we had never left the old camp and come to this city of sin and cunning. I am tired of it already, but what can I do?"

Dot said nothing more, but stepped out into the night, with a last look at Sandy Silas, who turned his head away to shut out the sight of her mute pleading.

"Confound it all! I would like to help her, but I can't," he muttered. "I've got my foot in it up to the ankle and I am now a member of the Black Tie myself. Dot is Feathers's daughter, and I would like to protect her. They stole the red package from her, did they? They know what it contains or they wouldn't have gone to the trouble to get it. The girl is in the shadow, like myself, though I am one of the League. I ought to go back on them and run the risk."

Silas watched the figure of Dot out of sight and then turned back into his trap.

The girl went forward until she found herself in a strange part of the city, when she stopped and drew back from a figure that seemed to be coming toward her with the tread of a tiger sneaking upon his prey.

She was desperate, this young creature was; she looked at the creeping figure with the eye of a hunted lynx, and when it was near enough she came out of the shadows and covering it with her hand, cried out:

"I see you. What do you want?"

The man stopped, perplexed.

"Don't stand there. I know you have been following me. Come on and take me if you will."

Dot stood like a statue in the shadows, and

her figure was drawn up to its true height while she addressed the man.

"I can't get away; I see that. You have been watching me ever since I escaped from the other place. What do you want, I say?"

In another moment she stood face to face with the man.

He was younger than he looked when he came out of the shadows and looked her in the face.

Dot was startled.

"I haven't been following you to take you back to the place from which you say you have escaped. I haven't been following you with evil intentions, either. Do you know from whom you have just come?"

Dot hesitated a moment and then said:

"I know. Do you know him?"

"Yes. They call him Silas Shrimp. He is a shoemaker, but just now he is hiding from some one. He turned you out, didn't he?"

"I didn't particularly ask him for permanent shelter. I hardly knew where I was when I found myself in his house. Chance took me to that place. I was escaping from a snare. I have been deceived and robbed. I am alone in the world, now that Feathers is dead."

"Who was Feathers?"

"He was about the only friend I ever had," was the reply.

"And he is dead, eh?"

"Silas Shrimp says he was murdered."

"When?"

"I don't know."

"That is strange. I have seen nothing in the papers about it. There was a strange murder some days ago, but that couldn't have been Feathers."

Dot looked, but though her glance was a question, she said nothing.

"That was a man who had millions! Was Feathers rich?"

"Not very," she smiled. "At least he didn't look like a rich man. I have seen Feathers have money, but he wasn't a millionaire by any manner of means."

"If you will accept a place from me—if you will let me shelter you till the storm blows over—I will feel grateful to you."

"But—"

"I am Ray Morton. I am connected with one of the metropolitan newspapers."

Dot seemed to fall back.

"You don't want to make a story for the paper, do you?" she asked.

"Not at all, miss. I have a sister who will be glad to help you for her brother's sake. Will you go?"

"I will go."

Dot was not long deciding.

"I will go with you because as I have told you I have no other place and I know not what else to do. I am the victim of some conspiracy. I have been taken from my home by a story which turned out to be terribly true from what the shoemaker said. Feathers has been murdered and I have lost the red package."

Half an hour later the girl, thus opportunely rescued from the hand of the Black Tie by the young reporter, was telling the story of her life to a sweet-faced girl who listened with moistened cheeks while the young man was pushing down a certain street to turn into Broadway at last and to run into an open hallway and then up a flight of steps.

He stopped at a door on the first landing and knocked.

Footsteps came toward the portal and he looked into the keen eyes of a good-looking man as he crossed the threshold.

He was in the den of the Broadway Sifter and was looking at Hiram Hercules himself.

That they had met before was evident from the greeting, for young Morton said with a smile:

"I had a singular pick-up awhile ago. There seems to be a mystery connected with it, and that's why I'm here."

The detective looked at his visitor and waited.

"I happened to find a girl on the street, a girl who seems to have fallen into the hands of a set of conspirators. But I'll give you the whole story and you can sift it out to suit yourself."

The ferret listened. By and by his face told how interested he was in the reporter's story.

He said nothing till young Morton was through.

"This is the very girl I have been looking for. This is the daughter of Feathers."

"Not his own child?"

"So I understand, at any rate. I recall what Bloxom told me and also what I have picked up since I took the trail of the millionaire's murderers."

"You don't mean to say that Dot, as she is called, is in some way connected with the mystery surrounding the death of Laban Joyce, the city nabob?"

"You shall see by and by. You say she was decoyed from home and robbed?"

"That is her story."

"And Silas Shrimp told her that Feathers was dead—murdered?"

"Yes."

"I would like to see Dot, but not just now."

"You will find her at my sister's. She shall have a home there."

"She should be guarded well. This is the coolest and biggest conspiracy I have ever dealt with. It was brought bodily from the mines of Sundown. It has for its motive revenge and the grasping of three millions, but the main motive is vengeance. The game was begun in the wild Southwest, but is to be played out here."

"But it will not be played out here, will it?"

"I don't know. I have picked up several links. I will pick up more if the Coil spares me."

"The Coil?"

"Yes—the Black Tie. Look here, Morton: there is to be no note made of this till all is over. You must not give your reportorial pencil a chance at the telling of this story until I have unraveled it all. If I fail you shall tell it anyhow, but if I win you shall have full swing."

The young man smiled.

Hiram Hercules stood half an hour later at the door of a house which when he knocked was not opened to him.

"Marcia must be asleep, but I must see her anyhow," he said.

He knocked again, but with the same result.

The little door did not open and the detective looked nonplused for a moment.

He opened the door with a key which he took with others from his pocket and went in in the dark.

The staircase before him was found and climbed. He stood at another door near the upper landing and then walked into a room where all was still.

The Broadway Sifter stood in Marcia's room, but he knew nothing of what had transpired.

The springing of the trap which had captured Marcia was all unknown to Hiram, and when he crossed the room and looked down upon an untouched couch he drew back and for the first time suspected foul play.

He struck a light and looked about the room.

Some one had been there; he could see that the chamber had been searched and in a not very artistic manner.

A man had been there. Everywhere there were evidences of this, and when Hiram Hercules fell back and looked for the last time preparatory to quitting the room he wondered anew what had become of Marcia the Soft-Handed.

Down on the street he stopped and seemed to collect his thoughts.

Marcia out of the game, he would lose a friend and one who knew so much about the wolves of Sundown.

He went back—back over a part of the trail he had made in coming to Marcia's retreat, and when he thought of his last adventures, he resolved anew, despite the discouraging outlook, not to suspend operations until he stood at the end of the mystery.

"Gerald Green threatened me," he said. "He said when we parted that if I persisted I might meet a death more terrible than the Coil of the Black Tie! What did he mean? What has he discovered about the killing of Laban Joyce? Who is he trying to shield?"

Not far behind the detective at that very moment skulked a figure by which he was watched wherever he went.

It was the figure of a well-dressed man.

There was nothing murderous-looking about the person as he came once or twice into the light for a second, only to vanish again among the shadows of the street.

He watched Hiram Hercules until he was near his own abode, then this man turned back and seemed to laugh out of his keen black eyes that reflected the glitter of the gas-jets. He walked slowly down Broadway until he was joined by another person whose arm he touched and to whom he said:

"I have tracked him home. He has been to her house. He was there in her room at least twenty minutes. He had been nowhere else. He is home now, I say."

The other looked at the speaker and seemed to wait for a command.

"You will go up to the room and slip this under the door. I don't want to kill the man without warning, though I think he has been warned enough already. I wonder how his neck feels?"

Then they separated and the one who had taken from the hands of the other a bit of folded paper turned away and went gliding through light and shadow toward the Broadway home of the great detective.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SECRET KEEPER AGAIN.

AMIE GLEASON, the French teacher, knew a good deal about the Black Tie.

If she was the old-time Cactus Belle of the Southwest and had come to the great metropolis with the band, she knew more than one secret connected with the conspiracy.

We have seen how she was taken into the underground rooms by the handsome man who showed her the corridor leading to the river and how he had commanded her to go back to Portia's home to play spy again.

In short, the girl was in the hands of the League; she was the woman described to the detective by Marcia the Soft-Handed; she was

the Cactus Belle of Sundown and, as such, was playing a deep game for the Black Tie in the house of the nabob.

But we have seen, too, how she revolted, how she fled from the Coil and passing into the old house went down among the corridors to find the door locked when she would turn back, and how she was forced to appeal to some river rats for help.

This woman had two natures: she was living a dual life and was afraid to go back to her old place.

On the other hand, she dared not face the man she had served.

She had revolted from the slavery of the Black Tie, perhaps considering that she had done enough for it and its master, and now she was eager to hide herself somewhere where it would not ferret her out and punish.

Amie was almost sure that she would be safe in a certain spot and none other.

After her adventure underground she disappeared to turn up in another part of the city where she remained hidden all of the next day.

It would have been a good thing for her if she had been contented where she was in a small house in a back court where the keen eyes of those who wanted her never would have discovered her retreat, but she was not satisfied.

It was the same night that witnessed the events we have last recorded, when Amie, disguised as she thought from the eyes of her hunters, left the place and found herself once more upon the streets.

She had not forgotten her adventure at the cheap eating-house where she had been recognized by Silas of Sundown, but she thought that this time she was disguised against all accidents and was ready to make one discovery in which she was interested.

She still thought that she had taken the life of Sandy Silas.

She could not believe that a good shot as she was could miss a head like his at so short a distance, and while she flitted down the street, she wondered if they had yet discovered the body.

The French girl hurried on, crossing street after street, until she looked up at a well-to-do house which gave forth no light to tell that it was inhabited at that time.

She passed close to this house at last and rang the bell.

While she waited for a response she looked up and down the street, but saw nothing suspicious.

When the door was opened just a little she stepped into the hallway.

"Heavens! when did you come back?" Amie looked at this person and then touched her on the arm.

"I'm here on a little business. Where is the girl?"

"Gone."

"Not gone from this house?"

"Yes."

"When did she go away?"

"The other night."

"Alone?"

"No. A man came for her and she went off with him."

"Do you think she has gone for good?"

"I can't say."

"Did she go willingly?"

"Yes, when he told her that her friend was very sick and wanted to see her."

"Did you hear him say who her sick friend was?"

"I believe he called him Feathers."

Amie uttered a slight cry.

"He told the girl that, did he?" she said.

"He told her that."

"See here. Do you know it was a lie—that Feathers was not only not sick at the time, but dead?"

"Of course I know nothing of the kind."

"Pardon me, I should not have said that. No, you are not in this game and consequently don't know what they are doing."

The woman in the hallway shook her head.

"So Dot is gone, is she? So they came and took her away—caught her in the snare?"

"In a snare?"

"Yes, but never mind; you are not interested in this game—not like I am."

Amie went out like a person in a dream.

The cool wind of night seemed to revive her.

"This infernal conspiracy gets blacker and blacker. I ought to do what's right. I know the secrets of the Black Tie. They can't kill but once. I know where the detective lives. I ought to go to him and tell him the truth. I know they will hunt me down for it—they are looking for me now; but that would be better than playing out the infamous lie I have lived."

She walked slowly from the house. She looked back once, but saw no one at her heels.

"Maybe he wouldn't believe me if I told him," she suddenly exclaimed. "I told him a well-concocted story once and he may have discovered that it was a lie. I wonder if he found out about the clock. I never found out myself till the next day. But he won't look after such small things. I ought to go to him."

Amie's face was the hue of snow while she walked from Dot's old home.

It was tensely drawn, showing that she was fighting a terrible mental battle, and while she walked she shut her gloved hands and looked up every now and then like a hunted animal.

"If I thought he would believe me I would go and tell him, but he might hold me for killing Sandy Silas. I don't want to be caught in the dragnet of the law. I want my freedom awhile yet. I want to get even for the slights and wrongs of Sundown. I want to meet this woman who took the ride on the wild horse across the cactus deserts. I want to stand face to face with Marcia, the Soft-Handed. After that I won't fear the law."

More than once the French girl stopped as if she was on the eve of turning back.

"I wonder if I could make a bargain with this man?" she said at last. "I wonder if I could enter into an oath-bound agreement with him by which I was not to be arrested until he was at the end of his trail? That would give me time. Then I would have time to play my hand and get even with her. I believe I will see."

This time she turned down the street with more resolution than ever before.

"I can sell this secret of mine and make a bargain with the detective. This man, Hiram Hercules, will surely find it all out by and by; but the trouble is I may be in the net when he draws it in if I don't bargain with him now. I will see what I can do. It will be like casting the dice of death, but no matter. I have cast them before."

She turned into Broadway and walked toward the detective's office.

Amie Gleason's face was now indicative of stern resolution and she had made up her mind to play a strange, cool game which was to give her time to smite her old foe.

She reached the building in which the detective lived.

She had been there before; she had prevaricated as of old in the nabob's house, but now she was to tell the truth to unravel the very plot at which the ferret was working with the shadow of the Black Tie about him.

Would he believe her? He undoubtedly believed that she had spoken false on another occasion and almost in the very presence of the dead. What right had he to believe her now?

Amie went up-stairs and stopped at the ferret's door.

She heard footsteps on the staircase and drawing back along the hall where the shadows lay, she watched the top of the flight.

Somebody was coming up from the street.

Presently a man's head and shoulders appeared.

Amie saw him go to the detective's door and drawing a letter from his bosom, slip it under the bottom of the portal.

She stood like a statue while the man did this and when he withdrew she sprang forward and pounced upon the letter like a hawk.

In another moment she had drawn it out by catching hold of the tip that showed itself under the door, and panting like one out of breath, she leaned toward the light and proceeded to master its contents.

As she read, every vestige of color left her face, her breath came in gasps, and she staggered against the wall for support.

She had read a death-warrant.

The paper trembled in her hands and she did not see it slide to the floor and quiver at her feet.

"Merciful God! I am suspected already and have been condemned. I am in the shadows of death, no matter what I say to the ferret," she cried. "This was intended for him, but it tells him that the traitress shall do him no good."

She looked down at the paper and then picked it up.

Then she saw what she had not seen before—a black mark across the sheet!

"The mark of the Black Tie!" she exclaimed.

"It is everywhere. The black ball has dropped again."

After awhile Amie became more calm and ventured to look at the detective's door.

No one was there and no human eye seemed to see her in the hallway.

With the message in her hand, she moved toward the door, but did not touch the knob.

"What matters it whether I tell him or not? I am doomed! This letter, fresh from the hands of the Black Tie, condemns me with him. They know that I have fled from the Nabob's house. I was ordered by him to go back and obey the Tie; but instead, I fled, and am under the curse of the League. I can't go in there and face him now. I will go back. I know where I can hide. I have been there alone. The corridors of the Castle will hide me. They won't look for me there."

She crushed the paper and stowed it away in her pocket, then with another look at Hiram Hercules's door, beyond which at that time sat the man of trails, unconscious of the velvet strides which had come to his den, she went down the staircase and out upon the street once more.

Our whole romance might have changed from that hour if Amie Gleason had rapped at the detective's door.

The trail might have turned if she had thrown

that letter upon Hiram Hercules's table and told him all she knew.

But it was not to be thus.

She went back to the little room which she now called home; she braved the insults of lurking men and penetrated the shadows of the slums to hide herself in the apartment from which she had crept with startling intentions.

"I must find Marcia the Soft-Handed. I must unearth this woman who took the ride across the cactus deserts and who escaped starvation and the vultures to appear in this city with her soft hands and cruel eyes. And Portia? Oh," with a laugh, "the ferret can draw the coils about you, woman. He can hang you for all I care! I am looking after myself now, and life is dearer to me at this moment than it ever was."

She looked at the paper again.

"He wrote it," she went on. "That is his writing and it gave him no pangs to pen those words. He knows but one thing—vengeance. He is here to kill and then to win. He is a match for all the trail-hounds of New York. The man who beat death itself, and who broke the power of the Nabobs is strong enough to baffle the cunning of Hiram Hercules. I am in his way now. Who would have thought that? I am in the very shadow of the Black Tie—I, his sister!"

Amie looked once more at the note, then threw it upon the table, and springing across the room threw herself against the door, as if some one had turned the knob and was coming in.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DEATH MANDATE.

BUT no one was at the door.

The young girl stood there a moment with her ears on the alert and her hands grasping something that was not the fold of her dress, and when she went back to the table her face had assumed another color and she seemed in better spirits.

"They don't want to track me too far," she hissed. "I may turn on the Black Tie in spite of its power and those who are at the head of it. They must not carry their vengeance too far in my case. I've served him well—better than a thousand would have done, and now, because I want to get out of the net—because I want to pay off a debt of my own—he must not set his spies at my heels and track me from pillar to post. I should have gone to the detective when I was at his door, but I hadn't courage when it came to a pinch."

She seemed to laugh at her own indecision and for a little while she stood at the table still watching the door.

After awhile the house grew still and Amie heard no more noises at the threshold of her retreat.

She had talked about Marcia, the Soft-Handed; she had said that she had a score to settle with that creature.

Marcia had called Amie the Cactus Belle to Hiram Hercules; she had told him that she was one of the characters in the game with the Nine Nabobs of Sundown.

Beyond this she had not cared to go.

Amie had looked for Marcia, had even gone to the house where she had been discovered, but had not found her at home.

She knew nothing of the adventure in the trap which had captured the Soft-Handed; she knew nothing of the killing of the dog and the appearance of the masked face in the ceiling.

She might have found Marcia if she had known of these things.

The Soft-Handed left by us in the room where she had vanquished the four-footed foe, was still there.

Many hours had passed.

She knew that she was in the grip of the Black Tie. She knew that the dog belonged to the League, that she was still in the hands of the Man from Montana, the man whose other name was Diamond Duke—the master spirit of the conspiracy against the Nine Nabobs.

Marcia had been fed, but the carcass of the dog had not been removed.

She had dragged it from beneath the window where she stood and looked down upon the surging life-tide far below her prison. Among the thousands who passed within sight of her not one looked up and saw her at the window resting her chin on her hand and growing fiercer and fiercer in looks as the hours rolled by and she still in the grasp of the Terror.

Marcia felt that all this would end some time and that before long.

She knew that her imprisonment would come to an end, and thought, despite her resolution to baffle the Terror, that it would end in her death.

The masked face had appeared but the one time in the ceiling.

Though she had watched the trap overhead, it had not been seen again and she believed that it would appear no more.

That it was the face of Diamond Duke she well knew.

The Man from Montana was behind the velvet and she had looked into his eyes and had listened to his voice.

Marcia often shut her hands while she stood at the window communing with her thoughts.

"I would like to know how the fight is going—if the detective is picking up any links, and whether they are fighting him with the Black Tie. I would like to be out and help him. I would like to get even with the men who lashed me to the black colt and sent me over the cactus trails of the desert."

She had spoken thus more than once since her incarceration.

She had given vent to her thoughts in such language a hundred times since the door closed on her and left her to combat the dog whose stiffened carcass was her sole company.

But now night had come again and she saw once more the lights of New York.

Marcia was at the window watching the flood of humanity as she could see it from that spot.

All at once a sound came to the door and stopped.

It did not seem to disturb her.

But when the knob turned and a key clicked, she looked toward the portal and then straightened where she stood.

The door opened and shut without noise.

The only light that prevailed was that which streamed into the room from a window in an adjoining house which was taller than the one she was in.

Yet it was enough to show her the man who stood near the door.

It was the man in the mask!

For a moment Marcia looked at him, and then, falling back to the window, rested her elbows on the sill and smiled.

"You are still here with your friend?" said the man, the mask which dropped below his mouth moving as he spoke.

Marcia said nothing; her look was enough.

"Woman, you are near the end of your trail. This is not to be a ride like the one you took across the desert. It is to end more terribly than that one ended."

"I am ready. I am ready to take that ride whenever you command it," she said. "I took the other one at your command, but the hand of fate was more merciful than yours and I came back from that journey to encounter you here."

"You remember the Nine Nabobs, Marcia?"

She made an impatient gesture with her hand.

"You know I do. I remember them and all the events that took place during the Nabob War. You throttled them one by one until you met your match in the last one, Major Marmaduke as you called him."

It seemed to Marcia that the eyes before her gleamed with a light that was deadly.

"Well, what say you of the conclusion of the game?"

"Do you mean the end of the game with Major Marmaduke?"

"Yes."

"You found him at last; you found him richer than all the Nabobs of Sundown; but you did not find him in that accursed country."

"No."

"I am not going to ask you how you and the Cactus Belle escaped from the Uncrowned Angel—"

"You don't want to know, I suppose. He never told you, did he, Marcia?"

"He never told me anything. I never was in that man's confidence. No, Major Marmaduke, or Laban Joyce, the millionaire, never took me into his confidence. I never crossed the threshold of his mansion. I had no business there."

"But you knew him?"

"It was my duty to know him," answered Marcia, quickly. "I knew him the moment I met him with Portia one day, in the Park. I knew that the last Nabob had turned up in New York—that he was Laban Joyce, the millionaire. I knew, too, that you were here, for I had made that discovery before I saw him. One by one I found you all out—the Cactus Belle, Feathers, Sandy Silas and Bloxom. The rest are here, too, but they have not shown their hands in this game—not openly, I mean."

"It is Sundown in New York, woman."

"The tigers have changed their lairs—that's all," she smiled. "I have watched for months; I knew you were at work."

"Yet, you never warned him."

"Why should I warn him? You know—"

She caught herself and stopped. "I might have warned him for the sake of the girl who loved him," she went on. "For Portia's sake I might have warned Laban Joyce, for I knew that the Black Tie was at work."

"But you did not, eh? You never told the detective, either."

There was sarcasm in the last words, and the cunning woman noticed it.

"A truce to this!" she suddenly cried, stepping from the wall and stopping in the middle of the floor. "What are you going to do with me?"

He seemed to eye her for a moment with cruel interest.

"After what has passed, you don't think we are going to open the door of this cage and let you out, do you?"

"I expect no such mercy."

"We can't send you back over the cactus trails. We can't send you to the realm of vulture and wolf. It is impossible to tie you to the back of another Comanche colt, and give you a repetition of the ride you took."

There was no reply on the woman's part.

"But we can do something else. There is doom for you in the very shadows that hem you in. I have learned a good many things since coming to New York. I am still 'the Man from Montana,' but the mountains no longer surround us, Marcia. We haven't the old mines, with their secret corridors and dark chambers. We miss the trails leading down to the underground tide that flows through the Stygian recesses of the Uncrowned Angel; but there are places here just as deadly and just as terrible to people with iron nerves."

She looked down at the street and seemed to catch sight of new lights there.

"Woman," he went on, lowering his voice as he leaned toward her, "your time is near at hand. If you think that the cage door is to open and let the bird out, you cruelly deceive yourself. It never opens to you!"

"Which means that I am to die at the hands of the Black Tie?"

The man from Montana laughed.

"You don't expect mercy, do you?"

"Why, no; not from you, at least."

Marcia saw him fall back to the door and put his hand on the knob.

She went toward him with a sudden motion, but he threw out one hand and waved her back.

"You can go back to your window and wait."

She stopped as if awed by the look that came from behind the velvet mask.

"Go back to your post and wait. We won't keep you waiting very long. Go over yonder and dream of the trails and mines of Sundown. We are all here—all but the dead. Fate has brought us together thousands of miles from the scene of our first play. Fate brings people together all the time. I promise you, Marcia, that it will not be long."

The door opened and he was half-way in the passage when she darted across the room with the cry of the tigress and was seized by his gloved hand and thrown back.

"I tell you to go back to your window and wait!" he cried. "It will not be long. You won't grow old waiting for the Touch. No, I will see that the woman who rode the black colt across the desert is not kept in suspense a great while."

Before she could recover and repeat her spring, the door was shut and once more she was alone in the chamber.

She glared at the portal with every nerve unstrung and her hands clinched.

Her eyes seemed ready to dart from her head, but all at once she beat the excitement down and laughed.

"Wait as he told you, Marcia," she said, addressing herself. "It will come before long. You will want your nerve when it is here. Yes, you will want the same nerve that carried you through the cactus lands, and which cheered you when the black pinions of the vultures were beating you in the face."

Back to the window she went, and leaning on the sill again, looked down upon the sights on the street and seemed to bite her white lips through.

As for the man, he passed down-stairs and out of the building.

On the street he took off his mask, showing a handsome face which was ornamented by a black mustache and a pair of clear, eagle eyes.

He hurried off and a few minutes later threw himself into a chair in a handsomely-furnished room.

Jerking a green cord over the table, he saw a door open and a man, broad-shouldered and with a quick, agile and noiseless step, approached.

"I have just come from the bird in the cage," said the Man from Montana, looking at the person standing like a statue before him. "I have just seen the fly in the web."

"I await your orders, captain."

The fingers on the table toyed a moment with a cigar lying there and then eyes which never left the ones watching their depths seemed to grow suddenly stern.

"The time has come! This woman is dangerous even where she is. We have seen her at work far from here, Marble Mark. We know that the devil aided her when she went on that ride across the desert. She came back from that journey. She is in the web now, but I saw in her eyes ere I turned away a light I didn't like. It wasn't just defiance; it was something else."

"Not hope, Captain Duke?"

"It was hope," echoed the Man from Montana. "Yes, in the eyes of this mountain tigress I saw hope. You know what to do. See that it is well done."

The man called Marble Mark fell back.

"We are on the home stretch. We have touched the last of the Nine Nabobs and now comes the Soft-Handed."

There was a bow and a smile.

A moment later Diamond Duke had crossed

his feet on the table and was smoking complacently as if he had not issued the death-warrant of Marcia, the Soft-Handed.

He heard nothing but the ticking of the clock on the mantel; he saw nothing but the smoke that curled toward the ceiling of that room.

CHAPTER XX.

AN EXCITING SCENE.

THERE was one thing which Hiram Hercules, the detective, could not forget and that was the last threat he had heard from the lips of Gerald Green, Portia's accepted lover.

What was to be his portion if he persisted in tracking the hand which had taken Laban Joyce's life?

If the young man loved the heiress of the Nabob's millions and believed her innocent of all crime, why had he threatened the life of the man who had sworn to bring only the guilty to Justice?

Hiram was alone in his office shortly after Amie's failure to rap at his door and tell him all she knew, when he was startled by a knock.

When he opened it Gerald Green stood on the threshold.

Portia's lover was the last man he looked for there, and when he fell back he found himself face to face with a person whose eyes glared with the light of madness.

"The door is shut? Yes, I see it is," said Gerald, not taking the empty chair at the ferret's table, but leaning over the cloth with his eyes fastened upon the man-hunter. "I am here to talk to you. I did not say all I wanted to the last time we met. You are all alone, are you?"

"You can see for yourself."

"I'll take it for granted."

Gerald finally took the chair, for he had cooled down, but for a full minute he looked at Hiram Hercules, saying nothing but showing his temper.

"You must quit this trail," were his first words.

"You have said as much before. You forget, however, that this case has passed beyond my hands—that it calls for settlement by the capture of the guilty."

"I know that, but if you abandon the trail it will not be taken up by any one. You are one of the keenest detectives in the city. You have the reputation of never failing. If you quit the trail now it will turn all others from it."

"You are pleading some one's cause now, aren't you?"

Gerald Green started a little.

The detective's question had gone to the mark.

"I need not tell you of my relations with Portia. I need not say that within the next few weeks she will no longer be Portia Joyce, but Portia Green."

"So soon, then?"

"Yes. She must not be dragged back into the dark pool of crime by having her honeymoon blighted by any connection with this trail of yours."

These were strange words and the detective smiled.

"There shall be no man-hunters about us when we are wedded. I will not have it."

"But Laban Joyce was her father?"

"Yes."

"You want the guilty punished, don't you?"

There was no reply.

Gerald Green fell back in his chair and the ferret saw his hands quiver as they touched the table.

"If you don't, say as much," said Hiram. "If you don't want the dead avenged—if you want the innocent to escape—answer me squarely and I will know what to do."

"By heavens! you don't put it right," was the reply. "You make me appear as the champion of the guilty. You are bound to make me out as shielding the murderer."

"What else are you doing?"

It was eye and eye for a moment.

Gerald Green seemed to read the inmost thoughts of the man of clues and on the other hand Hiram Hercules watched him as if his eyes were indexes to his secret feelings.

"You don't want the guilty punished," said Hiram at last.

"I do."

"Then, why am I to quit this trail, or, if I remain on it, feel a touch as deadly as that which took Laban Joyce's life?"

Green recoiled like one stung by a serpent. His own words had been used against him; they had been flung into his face by the cool-headed ferret.

"I have nothing more to say," said Green, rising.

"But I have," was the answer. "The door is locked. You cannot quit this room without my consent, nor until I open that door. You know something, Gerald Green. You know something about the death of Laban Joyce. You come to me with a threat which would place you behind bars and blacken your life and love."

He did not move.

"You want me to save the guilty and hang the innocent. You come to me with a plea which is horrible. You refuse to tell me why I shall quit this trail and stand by and see a miscarriage of justice. You say you love Portia—"

"There! For God's sake stop!" broke in Gerald Green, throwing himself forward and striking the table with his hands. "I can't stand this. I shall go mad. I have been mad these three days."

Hiram Hercules waited a moment.

The man across the table sat silent a little while and then buried his face in his arms.

When he looked up again he seemed to have passed through a year of suffering.

He no longer looked the handsome man he had been before that awful moment of self-torture. He stared at the detective and seemed on the eve of falling from his chair.

"I want you to spare the guilty," he said slowly, each word coming slowly from him like words of pain. "I want you to step from this terrible trail and let the world remain in ignorance of the truth. Won't you do it for our sakes?"

"For your sakes?" echoed the detective.

"Yes, for Portia's sake and mine."

"Then, you know."

Gerald stood erect and for a minute looked down upon the man at the table with a face seamed with inward suffering.

"I know. I know everything. I dare not tell you. I dare not trust myself in your presence. I might kill you in this room and thus take you from this trail by the hand of death. I dare not stay. For heaven's sake unlock that door!"

He turned toward the door and glared at it like a wolf.

He was a powerful man and Hiram Hercules feared he would hurl himself against the portal and send it crashing into the hall.

"Calm yourself," said the detective.

"No, I can't! To do so might be to lose my head and break my resolutions. I must go. Will you open that door?"

The detective rose and crossed the room.

When he looked at his visitor he saw that he had fallen back into the chair and he did not open the door.

"You will quit the trail, won't you? I can go back and tell Portia that you are no longer a bloodhound on this particular one, can't I?"

We will bless you all our lives and as for riches, you shall never lack for them."

"I have made no promises. You have taken certain resolutions. So have I. You seem to forget that this affair belongs not to us alone, but to justice."

Portia's lover started up like a maddened wolf.

"There it is again! You will not do it. You will continue on the trail and, in the end, blight two lives. What have you against me, Hiram Hercules?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"You want to blacken my whole career, don't you?"

"I would not for the world."

"Then, say that you are no longer on this trail. Say that you are not in this case."

Hercules looked at Green and wondered whether the man had lost his mind.

"You dare not tell me one thing," he said deliberately. "You dare not hint at what you affect to believe. You know that Amie the French girl said—"

Gerald put forth his hand and uttered a cry of torture.

"You're playing that hand against her, aren't you?" he exclaimed. "You know what the girl saw and heard in the house that night. You have coaxed Amie Gleason from us and she is now in your hands waiting, with her tongue, for the right time."

"You remember that the French teacher heard the clock strike two that night?" Hiram resumed, paying no attention to Green's last words.

"Yes, she heard it strike."

"What if the girl told a falsehood?"

Portia's lover seemed to recoil again. He sunk back into depths of the chair, but the following moment he was half-way across the table.

"Go on," he almost shouted.

"Do you know that that clock hasn't struck for three weeks?"

The only reply was a wild stare.

"I am telling you what I have discovered by investigation."

"But Amie heard the clock that night."

"She heard no clock."

"But she will swear to that for you when you have the fairest woman in this city fairly in the coils."

"Do you think so, Gerald Green. Do you think I will stand by and let that woman swear to a falsehood?"

Portia's lover seemed to take new breath.

"The incident of the clock might be swept aside by others stronger still," he said.

"One lie may succeed another," was the answer. "But now talk to me."

"I won't promise anything."

"I can account for your actions in but one way. You believe that Portia is in some way connected with the crime of the mansion."

Gerald Green pushed back his chair and sprung up.

"I answer nothing. I want your door opened."

I repeat the threat I made in my own house. Keep on this trail and feel a touch as deadly as the one that killed Laban Joyce!"

Hiram Hercules kept his temper; he had never had a case just like this.

"I am going to stick to the trail," he said. "I shall hang the guilty, but that person will not be Portia."

A laugh came across the room and Gerald Green turned from the door.

"You are trying me now," he went on. "You are only trying to bring me out. So be it. I will tell you. Hiram Hercules, your trail, if you are permitted to finish it, will stop at the woman I love. It is a terrible thing to say—it is a horrible thought; but if you ever hang any one it will be Portia Joyce!"

The detective came around the table, his eyes riveted upon the handsome man in the middle of his room.

"I don't know what you know, but I can speak from what I have picked up. You may be the holder of some terrible secrets which you think would turn the tide against Portia, the beautiful; but I know what I have discovered. Amie saw nothing that night—at least nothing of what she has told me. She heard no clock because it did not strike for good reasons."

"But she saw something," said Gerald Green.

"She saw Portia come out of that room. She saw her go to her own boudoir and when she went down to the library, she discovered Laban Joyce just murdered. How do I know this? Portia has confessed!"

"To you?"

"To me."

"Has she confessed that she did the deed?—that she made on his throat the sign of the Black Tie?"

"Not that! not that!" cried Gerald. "The girl knows nothing of that mark."

"But it was there?"

"Yes."

"Who placed it there?"

"Heaven knows."

"The girl is mad," said the detective. "I care not to what Portia has confessed. She must have gone mad. The blood of Laban Joyce is not on her hands. I will bring her up out of the shadow."

"You will place her in the very coils of death!"

"The millionaire was killed by the Black Tie. Portia is innocent. You may go back and tell her this from me."

There was a look and a laugh and in another moment Hiram Hercules heard the frenzied man going down his stairs to the lighted street.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SIFTER'S COOL HAND.

THE BROADWAY SIFTER was honest in his promise to bring Portia up and out of the shadow of suspicion.

For some time after Gerald Green's departure he stood amid the silence of his den and thought over the singular adventure.

The young man who had gone out had acted very strangely.

Had Portia really confessed?

Was it true that she had confessed that she was the guilty party and that, after all, the Black Tie was innocent?

Hiram Hercules could not believe it, yet Gerald had told him that such was the truth.

He went down upon the street.

Thanks to Amie's keen eye, there was nothing underneath his door, and he was not troubled with the warning which the man with the mask had caused to be placed there.

But he had been doomed all the same.

The hand of the Black Tie had marked him, the black ball had dropped for him and, in the eyes of the League, he was already dead.

The ferret was eager to pick up another link in the chain he was forging against the guilty; he had felt the touch of the Black Tie, but fortunately had escaped death and was still on the trail.

He wanted to find Marcia.

He had visited her rooms, but had not found her in. He did not know she had fallen into the trap of the Tie, but he was to discover that the League had fastened on the Soft-Handed and that she was in the shadow of an awful death.

Hiram Hercules stood on a certain corner that same night watching a man who seemed to have marked him by a sudden glance.

It was by the merest chance that he had caught sight of this person and while watching him with the eyes of a lynx, he kept his position, knowing that the eyes of the suspected party were upon him, and recalling his adventure with the Black Tie on the street when Doctor Grimsby saved his life.

When the man started off the detective followed and came up with him when he seemed to have given up the hunt.

The meeting was unexpected on the part of both.

In an instant the hunted man turned and looked at Hiram Hercules, and both men found themselves at the mouth of an alley which the Unknown, when apprehended, was about to enter.

"You've been tracking me," said the Unknown fiercely.

"I have," declared the ferret. "I have been looking for you, and having found you, I want to see you a moment on business."

There was a mad look in the eyes that were fastened upon Hiram and the lips seemed to snarl.

The detective saw that the man was tall and massive, a typical Hercules.

"You follow people a good deal!" hissed the other. "I know you."

"You have been abroad before to-night. You are now on a trail which, you ought to know, if followed, will get you into trouble."

The other laughed.

"Just as if I wasn't able to take care of myself," he smiled. "I've lived long enough to look after number one with a good deal of care, and, what is more, I allow no one to interfere with my business."

"Then I will interfere with it and you will come with me."

The Unknown looked down into the barrel of the revolver suddenly presented by Hiram Hercules, and the ferret conducted the man across the street and entering a house with him, led him through the first room which was a drinking den, to another apartment where they found themselves unmolested.

"Sit down!" commanded Hiram.

The man shrugged his shoulders and sullenly obeyed.

"What do you want?" he sent across the table.

"You belong to the Black Tie."

The look the detective got was a strange one and for a moment the person addressed seemed on the eve of bursting into a laugh.

"Who said so?" he asked.

"I did," remarked Hiram. "You belong to the Black Tie. You are now out on business connected with the good of that infamous order. You are a tool in the hands of the Man from Montana."

"That's nothing but guess-work."

"You shall see. You have just come from him. You have received orders within the last half-hour. You are now going to obey them. I know more than you think."

Suddenly the man across the table leaned toward the detective and for a second looked him steadily in the eye.

"Do you think you can fight us all alone?" he cried. "Do you believe that you can master the Black Tie? I see no reason for concealing it from you. We know that you are trying to break it up—that you are now at work trying to show us that you are able to break down the Order that crushed out the Nabobs of Sundown."

This was a confession which Hiram did not look for from that man.

He was expecting no such words from him, yet he saw that they were truthfully spoken, that the man was relying on the power of the Black Tie and he thought it was strong enough to crush him out and destroy his work.

"I know all about the fight for power in Sundown," declared the detective. "I can tell you everything that happened there."

"I don't doubt it. You have seen the Soft-Handed."

He meant Marcia.

"Never mind whom I have seen," answered Hiram. "I say that I can tell you all about the fight for power a thousand miles and more from this city. But you are in New York now. You can't hide in the mines nor secrete yourselves on the mountain trails."

"Well, what do you want with me in this place? You have brought me here to say something. Say it. Time is precious with me."

How cool and impudent he was!

"I want to know what has become of Marcia," remarked Hiram.

"You do, eh? What are you a detective for? You want to know what has become of the Soft-Handed, do you? Go out and find her. The city is your hunting ground and you ought to find a woman of her prominence."

"She has fallen into the trap of the Black Tie. You sent her once over the cactus desert lashed to a black colt, but she came back to worry you again, and now, finding her in this city, you have sprung another trap on her and she is in your power."

A cool aggravating look across the table was all the ferret received in reply.

"You won't tell me, eh?"

"Why should I?"

"Then, I begin here and tie the hands of your League."

"Do you mean that I will go with you from this place?"

"I mean that."

"On what charge?"

"I shall arrest you for conspiracy and attempted murder."

"Oho!"

The man fell back in his chair and laughed in the detective's face.

Suddenly he became serious.

"I have said that I would never see the inside of your eastern prisons. I have heard of them and that is enough for me. You want to find Marcia do you?"

"Yes."
"But still you will not trust me! You won't go with me if I offer to show you where she is."
"At this moment?"
"At this moment."
"You dare not show me."

The detective's prisoner rose and stood erect, his eyes emitting a different light and one in which he hid his real feelings.

"Truth to tell, I was on my way to where Marcia is when you overhauled me on the street. I belong to the Black Tie, but I am tired of its bondage. I will show you where she is. The woman who gave us so much trouble in Sundown is in the toils. You are right. The hand of the Black Tie has closed on her and she is in the shadow of death."

Was he telling the truth? Was this man, so daring and cool a moment before, honest in what he was saying now?

Hiram Hercules watched him like a hawk. He knew what such men are capable of; he had seen them at work and had encountered this one's counterpart on more than one trail.

Marble Mark, the messenger of death from Diamond Duke to the woman cooped up in the room with the dead dog, led Hiram Hercules up one street and down another.

It was man watch man all the time.

Presently he stopped and looked up at a house which rose before them.

"She is up there, or was when she was last seen," he remarked.

Hiram looked at the tall old place which seemed to seek the stars far above the lighted streets of Gotham.

Had he been brought to a trap of the League? Was the hand of the Black Tie about to close on him this time for good and was the man who had guided him to be the executioner of the Order?

But Hiram Hercules did not hesitate.

When the man opened the door he stepped in after him. His hand was at the butt of a revolver and at the first movement of treachery a dead man would lie at the foot of the wall.

They ascended the staircase, Marble Mark ahead; they climbed to the first landing and rested a moment. No one but themselves seemed to be within that house at that moment. They must have been the only living persons beyond the doors.

Up another section of the dark steps and then another.

Hiram thought the man was leading him to the very roof of the old trap, but still he did not remonstrate. Wherever the guide was willing to take him he was not afraid to go.

The halt came at last.

Hiram saw his guide glide down a corridor and stop at a certain door.

The crisis had come.

"Is she in there?" asked Hiram Hercules going forward and looking at the door from which Marble Mark had turned to face him.

"She was left here. But I have lost the key."

The look on the speaker's face could not deceive the detective.

It was a game to get him to try his keys on the door. It was a scheme against his life, a trick of the Black Tie, one which was expected to give Marble Mark the advantage he wanted.

"Can't you open the door with your keys?" continued the tall man from Sundown.

"You will open it with yours."

Marble Mark looked in amazement at the man who addressed him. He had underrated the capability of the man he had led to the door.

"But I have no key."

In an instant the revolver of Hiram Hercules looked him in the face.

"Open that door!" sternly declared the ferret.

Marble Mark seemed to lose every vestige of color.

He turned sullenly to the door, but did not move.

"You have brought me to the door which you intimate hides from me the woman called Marcia," continued Hiram. "You are now trying to play a trick to serve your own advantage and the advantage of the Black Tie. If you refuse to open the door, I will drop you dead at its foot and open it myself."

Thus confronted, the man from Sundown looked into the eyes of the ferret and fumbled in his pocket.

"As I hope for final pardon, I have lost the key!" he cried.

A light burning at one end of the corridor fell upon the figures at the door. It showed Hiram Hercules the flashing eyes of his conductor and told him that he was dealing with a desperate man, one fully under the thumb of the Black Tie.

"I give you one minute to open the door!" cried Hiram.

Marble Mark almost broke his teeth while he ground them in rage.

He straightened and laughed.

"The trick has failed," he remarked. "That room is empty."

"Then back down stairs to the street and from the door below to Marcia's trap or to prison."

Marble Mark seemed to see that he had been outwitted.

He let slip an oath and fell back against the door he would not open.

"If that's your move, kill me where I stand, Hiram Hercules, for I will never betray the Black Tie!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXII.

A BIRD ESCAPES.

HIRAM HERCULES did not lower the revolver nor did he step back and stare at the man who uttered the sullen declaration that he would sooner meet death than betray the Order to which he belonged.

He had dealt with desperate men before.

True, those whom he had met and vanquished were the desperadoes of the city; he had never encountered men fresh from the wild mines of the West—men who were used to desperate schemes and who generally ended their days with their boots on and at the muzzle of some revolver.

Marble Mark was but the tool of the main man in the game now being played. He was but one of the band headed by the Man from Montana, or Diamond Duke as he was called, the foe of the Nabobs and undoubtedly the head person in the plot against Laban Joyce or Major Marmaduke.

Hiram Hercules looked coolly at the man backed against the door with the last words still quivering his lips.

There was sullenness in every word he had uttered. He had shut his lips behind the last one and was looking at his confronter with all the coolness of a desperado and his hands were hanging along his limbs ready, as the detective knew, to spring up at the least show of advantage.

"About! and go down!" commanded Hiram.

Marble Mark looked again, but kept his place. Hiram fell back and watched the cool head for a moment, then stepped forward suddenly thrusting the six-shooter into his very face.

"Go down or remain!" he cried.

Marble Mark fell away from the door.

"You will show me the trap that holds Marcia the Soft-Handed or you will go to prison."

"That's your game, is it?"

"That's the game."

"Then you shall see the woman you want."

Hiram smiled.

But a moment ago this man said he would sooner die than betray the Black Tie.

Had he changed his mind, or had a hope of a successful trap entered his head?

Marble Mark went down the corridor. He did not look back, but he heard the tread of the ferret at his heels. He knew that the man of more than one great trail was watching him, and that the six-shooter had not fallen the breadth of a hair.

He stopped at another door.

"Go on!" commanded Hiram.

"I thought you wanted to find Marcia, the Soft-Handed," was the reply.

"Is she in that room?"

"I am here!"

The voice came from beyond the door.

It startled the ferret for it was a woman's voice, and when he looked again at Marble Mark that worthy was drawing a six-shooter as deadly as his own.

"Hands off!" cried Hiram.

The baffled man obeyed and glared at the door.

"Open it!" commanded the detective.

"I will," answered Marble Mark, and taking a key from his pocket he unlocked the portal and threw it open.

In another instant a woman's figure made its appearance and Marcia stood before the two.

"In God's name, where did you pick up that man?" she cried, looking at Hiram while she covered Marble Mark with her hand. "That is one of the cool heads of the Black Tie—that is Marble Mark, the man who, next to Diamond Duke, was the most dangerous of all the plotters in Sundown. But you forced him to bring you to me, eh? Where's your master?"

Marcia had turned to the man standing erect in the corridor and gazing at her with all eyes.

"You'll find out soon enough!" he cried.

"Yes, you will have that question answered in full despite that man who calls himself detective and mystery-sifter. You will yet see more peril than you saw on your famous ride through the desert. Your time is coming, and yours, too, Captain Hercules. Don't think that because you know of the existence of the Black Tie, the mere knowledge arms you. It does not. We will make our name as terrible in this city as we made it in Sundown among the Silver Hills."

Marcia looked at him a moment longer, and then turned to the open door.

"I leave my companion," she exclaimed.

"He is lying in there, and has been ever since he was thrust into the room to finish me with his strong teeth."

Marble Mark looked into the room and smiled.

He saw the carcass of the dog lying in one corner.

"You don't want this man, do you?" she asked, looking again at the Broadway Sifter.

"Not now."

"Then he can take my place. I will let him have a taste of prison life in this house where

one is as isolated as he would be on the plains. Go in there, Marble Mark!"

The Westerner drew back.

"You won't, eh? You don't want to keep the dead dog company? But you shall!"

Marcia went at Marble Mark with the agility and temper of a tigress; she seized him by the collar and before he could resist her, he had been forced across the threshold, and had fallen against the wall beyond.

"There, let him have a taste of prison life," laughed Marcia, as she locked the door and triumphantly thrust the key into her pocket. "He won't remain there long, for Diamond Duke, or another of the band may come to see what became of him. But we will let him enjoy himself while he can, for the time is coming when every one of them shall feel the hand of Marcia. Instead of the soft hand, then it shall be one of iron!"

She could not look beyond the door, therefore the tableau presented in that room was not visible to her eyes.

She could not see the tall man standing against the wall glaring first at the dead bull-dog, and then at the door where he had heard the click of the key.

"Come," continued Marcia. "I want to breathe some fresh air again. It is stifling here and one nearly suffocates in that cramped room. You have found me, Captain Hercules. How goes the game?"

Hiram did not answer her in detail until they were once more in the room from which Marcia had been decoyed by the Black Tie.

She smiled, even laughed, over her triumph, and whenever she thought of the man cooped up with the dead brute, she gave vent to her feelings, for next to Diamond Duke she hated Marble Mark, of Sundown.

"I know I am a marked woman," she remarked. "From this time on I will be the doubly marked victim of the Black Tie. The Man from Montana will be on the lookout for me. I will be his evil genius here as I was in the far West. You are trying to solve the mystery of Laban Joyce's murder. Tell me what you have done."

Hiram had confidence in this woman. He saw no reason for doubting the sincerity she had shown in his behalf, and he did not keep much from her.

When he came to speak of Amie the French girl, Marcia stopped him.

"There is the serpent of this whole game!" she cried. "There is the woman who is capable of anything. Do you believe what she told you her real adventures the night of the murder? I don't. Amie is the same now as when she was called the Cactus Belle. She is Diamond Duke's sister, but few suspected it in Sundown. You deal with a cool one when you play against her. She went to the millionaire's house for a purpose. She carried out every command which issued from its head. She is the serpent of the game, I tell you. Heavens! how she hates me."

"I know that."

"Some day we will meet. Something tells me that before this game is over, I will stand face to face with Amie, the Cactus Belle."

Marcia did not resume for a moment. She looked away and the watchful detective thought he saw her lips grow white and part twice before she spoke again.

"We ought to be on the trail," she suddenly cried. "I will let you fight the Black Tie after your own notion. But beware! From this moment no mercy will be shown us. The Tie will touch us if it can. You must not think to frighten from this city Diamond Duke and his men. The man who faced and fought the Nine Nabobs is not to be deterred from the play in hand. We are doomed. No doubt the black ball is ready to fall for both of us."

Hiram Hercules looked into Marcia's face and spoke a name which startled her.

"Dot has lost the red package," he remarked.

She started like one stung by a snake.

"Lost it, eh? Then it has fallen into the hands of the Black Tie," she exclaimed. "That is bad work."

"What did that package contain?"

"It was your chance. It held one of the secrets of your trail. It was written by the man called Feathers, and left with Dot, not to be opened until she was nineteen."

"But how could it affect the case in hand—the murder of Laban Joyce?"

"I cannot tell you, but it does. Dot must have been robbed."

"She was decoyed by the Black Tie and robbed of the red package."

Marcia did not speak for a moment.

"I would like to see Dot, but not now. By going to where she is, I might betray her to the Black Tie and not for the world would I place that fair girl in jeopardy. You are going, are you?"

"Yes. I am going back to the trail."

"I can't forget what Gerald Green told you and what he believes. Don't you know that Portia is in the toils—that the Black Tie can crush her and make her appear guilty of this horrible crime?"

"But it shall do nothing of the kind!" exclaimed Hiram Hercules. "I will see that it does not succeed."

"If it touches you—if you feel the Black Tie at your throat again—it will be for the last time, and then Portia will be lost. Yes, if Diamond Duke and his men get you fairly into their power, all the friends you have will not be able to break that net and free you in time. This Order came from Sundown complete in every part. It came with an oath of secrecy and silence. It came with hands ready to send its enemies into the dark unknown. Major Marmaduke, the last of the Nine Nabobs, has passed the great divide and is the last victim of the Tie. Others are marked. The black ball is ready to drop. Be on your guard, Hiram Hercules."

"And you?"

"I need no warning. I know what it means when I am tracked day and night. I know the full meaning of the imprisonment I have undergone. I was waiting for death when you came. Marble Mark, the secret executioner in the West, must be the same here. Diamond Duke sits in his sumptuous parlor and issues death-warrants right and left. You are yet to discover, if you are not baffled, whose hand took Major Marmaduke's life."

"I will find out."

A singular smile for a moment rested on the white face of Marcia the Soft-Handed.

"Portia is deeper in the toils than you think," continued the woman. "She is really in the shadow of death. You must not expect to release her without a terrible struggle. What Gerald Green more than half believes against you assurance, is going to fight against you. You will be baffled by that man, if you are not careful. He tells you that Portia has confessed. Do you believe that? No, you do not. Portia may have gone down to the library that night; she may have discovered Laban Joyce dead in his chair. Amie may have seen her go down and come back; but the deadly hand was not hers. Portia could not leave the sign of the Black Tie on the dead throat. She knows nothing of the secret of that imprint. Diamond Duke and his men are the holders of that secret. But wait. We will get at it by-and-by—if we don't feel it on our own throats, ha! ha!" and Marcia laughed while the detective crossed the threshold of her little room, looking back into her determined eyes which were full of merriment despite the situation.

"Heaven protect him!" cried the woman, falling back and lifting her hand above her head. "He rescued me from the hand of the Tie. I will, if I can, come between him and the death that threatens him!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

"A FIVE-HUNDRED-DOLLAR LIE."

"WELL?"

"You see I am back."

"I see that, but you don't look much like a man who has carried out my orders to the letter."

"I confess for once that I have failed to carry out the mandate of the Black Tie."

"You have failed? Look here, man! Do you know what that means?"

"I know. I have been with you long enough to know what it means. I did the best I could, but when one is caught—not napping, for I was not doing that—but when one is caught, I say, he must do the best he can."

Diamond Duke, the man who looked at the last speaker, could not believe the evidence of his own ears.

Marble Mark had come back from his unsuccessful mission.

He stood before the head of the Order and was coolly telling him that his last commands had not been carried out—that, instead of such an event, Marcia was at large and the detective had baffled them all.

The Man from Montana looked at his friend, but did not reply for a moment.

"You have never failed before, Marble Mark," he said.

"I have never been pitted against Hiram Hercules."

"That is true; but that should not discourage us."

"It does not discourage me."

"Gods! I'm glad of that. We have swept other men as good as this one from our path."

"We vanquished the Nabobs."

"That is true. We gave them to the vultures."

"All but one."

"And where he died there are no vultures," smiled Diamond Duke.

Marble Mark looked across the room and caught sight of the red arras that hung there.

"Sit down and tell me all," remarked Diamond Duke. "I want to hear how he outwitted you."

The executioner of the Black Tie obeyed. He took a chair and told the man in the embroidered smoking jacket all about his adventure with the man on the trail. He did not omit a single move and was listened to with the greatest attention.

"You did not keep the dead dog company very long, eh?"

"No, the door was strong, but it was nothing for me to break it down. All I had to do was to throw myself against it and down it went. Then I was free. I fully expected to see Marcia and the detective on the street, but I saw nothing of them and when I got out I went to look at her old home. They were there."

"Did you see them?"

"No, but I saw a light in her window as I used to see it. She must have been in the room telling the detective about her life in the cage."

"Probably," smiled Diamond Duke.

Half an hour later a man who looked somewhat like the handsome head of the Black Tie might have been seen in a certain part of the city, and all at once Silas of Sundown—Sandy Silas—was startled to find himself face to face with his new master.

"Where is the girl?"

"What girl?" asked Sandy, shrinking from the eyes that seemed to look him through.

"The one who sought your house for refuge."

"Do you mean Dot?"

"Yes."

"I turned her out. You don't think I would harbor her, do you?"

"What became of her?"

"I don't know. I didn't follow her upon the street."

Diamond Duke seemed to lean toward the shoemaker of the Silver Hills, and regard him closely for a moment.

"You belong to us now. Don't forget that," he remarked. "You have been taken into the Black Tie. You are one of us, and you must obey the mandates that are issued."

"I will do my best," answered Sandy Silas. "I don't want to get into trouble, though."

The shoemaker shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes," he admitted. "I know I belong to you."

"If you are a coward already, the Black Tie doesn't want you," was the quick retort.

"I don't want to see the inside of the kind of prisons they have in this part of the world."

"You sigh for the land of no prisons but of silent graveyards, do you?"

"I would rather be dead than shut up in a cell."

The dark eyes of Diamond Duke were seen to flash.

"Then, see that you don't fill one of the narrow cells where no one is ever disturbed," observed the head of the Black Tie. "I have orders for you."

"For me?"

"For you. You want to find that girl for us."

"Dot?"

"Dot. I more than half-believe you know where she is hiding."

"No, captain. I swear—"

"There is no need of that. You will find her and report to me."

Captain Duke turned and went to the door.

"See here!"

He whirled and looked at Sandy Silas.

"I want out of the League now. I don't want to have to hunt down a girl who within the last few days has lost everything dear to her—her best friend, her precious package—"

"Silence! You have the commands of the Tie. It is your duty to find Dot for me."

The keen look that flashed up into Diamond Duke's eyes, the hand he displayed for a moment and in a manner calculated to show Sandy Silas how white and suggestive it was in its tigerish softness—all this made him shudder.

He said no more, but waited until the door had closed on the chief of the Black Tie.

Then he struck the old table with his fist and cried out:

"I am in the toils with the rest of them! Why did I ever leave Sundown? Why didn't I unite my fortunes to those of the doomed Nabobs and perish with them?"

There was no answer, but near his door at that very moment listening while he smiled, stood the man who had just left the house, and when he went out and struck the street, the smile on his face deepened and seemed to lurk a long time underneath his mustache.

Sandy Silas put on his hat and crept from his hovel.

He looked in every direction as he crawled up to the street and creeping through the shadows of the tall buildings, he glided off, now and then shivering as if the fear inspired by the man who had visited him had filled him with genuine terror.

"By the eternal! if I knew where Dot was I would warn her and take the chances," he growled. "I would defy the Order and tell her to put a thousand miles between her and the Black Tie. I don't know who killed Feathers, but the man who has just left my shanty knows. He knows more than that. And the three who came into the room and were made witnesses of my coming into the band—they have secrets of their own; but they are sworn to silence and I will be a hunted man if I don't obey every accursed mandate of the Black Tie."

He vanished to turn up in another part of the city.

He stopped where he thought he was secure from observation and watched a certain building.

It was a strange place for Sandy Silas to stop at that hour.

He was in the shadows and continued to pay attention to the house for nearly an hour.

What was he thinking about then?

Did he believe that Dot, the wail, was in that particular house?

At last the door opened and a man came out.

With the action of a trained bloodhound, Sandy Silas threw himself upon this man's track and followed him down-town. He watched him enter a house and before he could shut the door he was there.

"Hold on a moment! I want to see you," cried Sandy.

The man turned upon him with astonishment in his eyes and a face suddenly grown white.

"Come in, then; but, by heavens! man, you are a queer-looking chap to stop me here."

The man who addressed Sandy Silas led him to a back room where he turned on the gas and waited for him to speak while he watched him with startling interest.

"You're Gerald Green, aren't you?" asked the man from Sundown.

"What if I am?"

"If you are you are the very man I want to see. If you're somebody else, I guess I'll go."

Gerald laughed.

"You may remain, then," he remarked. "I am Gerald Green."

Sandy looked at him a moment longer and then went on.

"Do you know you're in danger?"

"In danger?"

"You with the rest of them."

"Come, what do you want for this information?"

"Nothing. I want to do you a favor."

"What have I to fear?"

"Do you know who killed Major Marmaduke?"

Gerald Green was seen to lean eagerly forward.

"You want to be careful what you say here," he cried, his eyes suddenly emitting a flash as they regarded Sandy. "I won't have her talked about by a man like you."

"That's pretty direct, and I am not used to being addressed that way."

"But I will talk as I please. I say you would better be careful how you talk about her."

Sandy Silas looked astonished.

"Hang me I wasn't aware that I mentioned any one!"

"But I understood you all the same. Who sent you to me? Do you serve Hiram Hercules, the persistent detective?"

"Heavens, no! I wouldn't be here now if I had transferred my allegiance to that man. I merely asked you a question, seeing that you are interested in a young lady who seems to be in trouble. Do you know who killed Major Marmaduke, called in this city Laban Joyce?"

Gerald seemed to gasp for the breath he wanted.

"I have locked that door and you can't get out until I open it," he observed. "I have you in my power and if you try to play a hand I will drop you dead where you sit."

"You may. By the soul of my mother, who is dead, I will deal squarely with you. I want out of the toils in which I find myself. I want to go back to Sundown. I want to put thousands of miles between me and Diamond Duke, the Man from Montana. But I have no money."

"Oh, you want to sell me nothing for something, do you?"

"I want money. I must have it. I will swear to everything I tell you. But you haven't answered my question."

"Yes," said Gerald. "I know who killed Laban Joyce; but I will not tell you. I suppose you claim to know. I presume you have come to me with a 'great secret' which you want to sell for enough to get out of the city on. I don't want to hear you."

"You don't, eh?" answered the man from Sundown, rising and falling back. "You're almighty independent. You may not know as much as you think you do. If you know who did it, why don't you take your secret to the man who has been looking for it ever since the deed was done?"

"It is my own secret, and I will do what I please with it."

"Oho," whistled Silas. "You'll keep it or trade it off as you please, will you? Well, I may take a notion to sell the secret elsewhere."

"You will do nothing of the kind until I unlock that door."

The shoemaker of Sundown began to feel uneasy. There was a dangerous light in Gerald's eyes.

"Well, what is the secret worth?" asked Gerald, after a look.

"Five hundred dollars."

"And I shall have the truth?"

"The sworn truth!"

The young man, with a queer smile on his face, counted out the money.

"Now," said he, "who killed Laban Joyce?" The shoemaker grinned as he picked up the cash.

"Amie, the Cactus Belle," he replied.

"That's a five-hundred dollar lie!" cried Gerald Green.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE STORY OF SUNDOWN.

"That's all right," declared Silas as he looked from the young man to the door, and wondered if it would open and let him out with the money.

"You have told a lie for five hundred dollars. Amie never killed Major Marmaduke, as you men of the West call him."

"Who did, then?"

There was no answer to this, but it was seen that the lips of the young man came firmly together, and that his eyes watched Silas like a hawk.

"That's your secret, is it?" cried the man from Sundown.

"That is my secret," deliberately answered Gerald.

Silas still held on to the money. He did not want to give that up as he had made up his mind to get out of the clutches of the Black Tie, and put between him and it, as many miles as he could and as soon as possible.

"I would give you a thousand if you could prove that," finally said Gerald. "Yes, I would make it five, but it is impossible, man. You can't prove that the girl called Amie killed him. Where is she?"

Silas did not know.

He only knew that she had tried to take his life—that she had flashed a revolver in his face and that he had escaped by a miracle.

He told Gerald that he could not locate the French girl.

"You may be in league with her for aught I know," he went on. "You pretend not to know where she is."

"She is somewhere in this city."

"Bring her to me with proof of your assertion and I will more than double the money I have paid you."

"I will tell you where I think she may be found."

"But you don't want to hunt her yourself, do you?"

"I want to get out of the city."

He did not say why, but there was on his face a frightened look like that of a man under fear of death, and this so impressed Gerald that he said with a smile:

"You've got someone at your heels, haven't you?"

Sandy confessed that he had.

"You want to get back to the mines, do you? You all came from there some time ago."

"That is true. Sundown is all here."

"Tell me all you know about Major Marmaduke's life there."

"He was the last Nabob."

"I know that much. I have picked up that from the private papers he left behind."

"He was the coolest man the Black Tie had to fight. I can't go into the details of the game they played there."

"It is early yet," and Gerald glanced at his watch.

"But I want to get away!"

"What do you fear, man?"

"By selling you the secret I have broken my oath to the Black Tie."

"That's it, is it? But the door is locked, I tell you, and no man can enter or depart until I open it. You knew Major Marmaduke there?"

"I knew him."

"Where did he come from when he landed at Sundown?"

"He said he came from Sonora."

"Was he rich then?"

"Yes. He was a Nabob when he struck camp. He took hold at once. We used to think that the Nine Nabobs were nine brothers; that as fast as the Black Tie mastered one, another sprung up and took his place; but how they got the news was a mystery we never solved. They came on in regular order and as fast as one fell another stepped into his shoes and ruled with the same rod of iron as his predecessor. I dare say there was never anything like it in the history of the silver camps."

"It was very strange," remarked Gerald.

"Major Marmaduke was the last one. He found the Black Tie triumphant when he came, but the moment he entered camp we knew there was another Nabob to fight. The Black Tie knew it, too."

"Did they resemble one another—these nine men?"

"They were alike as peas," smiled Sandy Silas.

"All brave?"

"Men of grit and iron. We thought the last one was the bravest of the lot. He came alone. He took command by common consent, as it were, and before long knew that he had the Black Tie pitted against him. He said nothing, but worked the mines as his brothers had done

and when he seemed on the top wave the first blow fell."

"What was that?"

"It was the sending across the desert of Marcia, the Soft-Handed."

"Who was she?"

"A woman who hated Diamond Duke and his men, and who, while she did not side openly with the Nabobs, called the work of the Black Tie downright murder. She was the wife of the third Nabob."

"This woman was?"

"Yes; she was the wife of Gold Hand, the third Nabob."

"I don't see why they spared her."

"They did, though, until they sent her across the desert lashed to a Comanche colt which had never had a rider."

"Who rescued her?"

"Satan, I guess," grinned Sandy Silas. "At any rate, she came back from that ride, but finding the Black Tie's chief dead, or supposedly so, she went off and never came back any more."

"Do you mean to say that the last Nabob got the upper hand—that Diamond Duke was baffled in the game he was playing?"

"We all thought so, for one day Diamond Duke vanished with his sister."

"Oh, he had a sister, then?"

"Yes, the Cactus Belle."

Gerald Green started and fixed his eyes on Sandy Silas.

"You don't mean to tell me that this woman called Amie—"

"Was that sister? I mean to tell you nothing else. She was Diamond Duke's sister. Well, she vanished with him. They went down into the Uncrowned Angel and were not seen to come up out of its depths."

"But they did."

"Yes, after the last of the Nabobs had disappeared as if he had played out his hand and got even with the Black Tie."

Portia's lover seemed to reflect for a few moments. He watched the man in the chair across the table and made a close study of his face.

"Is that your story?" he asked.

"Up to a certain time it is," was the answer.

"I need not tell you that the scene of the game has been transferred to this city. It was a fight to the death between the last Nabob and the Black Tie. It was a trail across a continent. It was a tracking which proved successful, and somehow or other fate brought all of us together in this great city where the fight was resumed."

"I see. She may be innocent after all!" cried Gerald, passing his hand across his forehead. "But all this seems a dream. I can hardly believe that I have listened to a real narrative. I never heard this story before."

"I have never told it in such detail. I have kept my lips closed, hiding half of the time in a den, where I cobbled to hide my identity. I did not want any one to know that I was once Sandy Silas, of Sundown; but I was drawn into the vortex. I have been caught in the net which never fails to catch its victims, and I now belong to the Order I refused to join in the mountain camp."

"To the Black Tie?"

"Yes. I was captured by Diamond Duke. Before I could resist I was in the toils. Do you wonder that I want to put thousands of miles between me and the cold touch that kills?"

"I do not; but now you must not go."

"But you don't know the truth, man," cried Silas. "I have broken the oath of the Black Tie. I am a marked man."

"I don't care for that! You shall not go."

"Then, I wish to Heaven I had never crossed the threshold of this room."

Sandy Silas stood up and glanced at the door.

"You must find Amie for me. No, we will go to a detective with what you have told me."

"Well," the man shrunk back with a gasping cry.

"There was a time when I faced revolvers with the coolness of a Spartan; now I am afraid of my shadow. There is something terrible in the thought of feeling about your neck the coil of the Black Tie."

"What is it?"

"I have never seen it myself. I know that the Nabobs all wore it; I know that when it touched the victim he died. There is no antidote for that dread disease."

"And you tell me that Amie killed Major Marmaduke?"

"That is my belief."

"Ho! nothing more than that?" cried Gerald. "Your belief? Don't you know, man, that this is no proof at all?"

"The girl knew all about the coil."

"That may be, but she would not be likely to receive the command to carry out the death mandate."

"She was in the house that night."

"That is true."

"She is Diamond Duke's sister."

"Yes."

"I can tell you no more. What I have said ought to be enough. The secret is in Amie's keeping. She knows."

"But she says—"

The rest of the sentence halted on Gerald's tongue.

"What does she say?"

He went over to where Sandy Silas stood.

"She says she saw something terrible in that house that night. She saw Portia come out of the library at the hour of two in the morning."

"Does Amie say that?"

"Yes."

"Then she will stick to it. See here: Why don't you go to the detective with this news? Hiram Hercules is the only man who can save Portia."

Gerald drew back.

"He is trying to hang her, that man is!" he hissed.

"I can't believe that. What, this ferret trying to hang Portia? I won't believe it, I care not who says it is true."

Gerald looked at the man, who had struck the table with his clinched hand and who was now staring him in the face with the coolness of a man of iron.

"If this man, Hiram Hercules, had been the ninth Nabob there would have been no final ruin for Sundown. You don't trust him. You haven't courage enough to trust the fortunes of yourself and Portia in this bloodhound's hands."

"I don't like him. He goes ahead despite the terrible proof I have that Amie did not kill Laban Joyce, and he will keep on until he blights two lives unless he is stopped."

"The Black Tie will check him if it can."

Gerald without another word and to Sandy's surprise, unlocked the door.

The man from Sundown looked at him and passed out.

"I am going to get out of the coils," he observed, holding out his hand to Gerald.

"You won't find Amie for me?"

"I dare not. I have broken my oath. I am a traitor to the Black Tie. The ball will drop for me."

"Go, then. I will find her myself."

"You can't, man. You should employ this ferret—this man who never fails to hang the guilty."

A cry broke over Gerald's lips. He shut the door in the man's face and heard him for a moment on the sidewalk.

"I wonder where this man lives?" he thought.

"I may need him again. I want to ask him a question about Major Marmaduke's early life, but feared to do so. It is not too late yet. He is still near."

He went out, but Sandy Silas had vanished.

"I'll see him again. He won't attempt to quit the city with this fear upon his soul. I will see him later."

No, Gerald Green; you have seen the shoemaker of Sundown for the last time.

Sandy Silas is about to quit the stage of action and the cold coil of the Black Tie is in lurking for its second victim.

Go back and fight for Portia's honor.

CHAPTER XXV.

FACE TO FACE AT LAST.

MARCIA'S resolve to protect the Broadway Sifter from the hands of the Black Tie came from the heart.

When she saw him quit her presence she wondered what would be the next move in the game, for she realized that the cool ferret was in danger.

But what could she do?

She had escaped from the trap of the League and would be hunted again by Diamond Duke and his minions. She knew what these men were. She had seen them tried among the Silver Hills and felt that in order to fight them, she would need all her courage and cleverness. She was hiding from her late captors, as it were, but she did not let this deter her from going out.

Marcia resolved to play detective a little.

It was her desire to keep track of the Black Tie and to see what it was doing so as to be able to thwart it when the proper time came for that sort of work.

She did not know what had become of Amie, the Cactus Belle.

Marcia, the Soft-Handed, knew that she had an enemy in the person of the French teacher, but she was not aware of the fact that at that very moment Amie was looking for her and that with fierce desires, ready to tear her to pieces with the vindictiveness of the robbed tigress.

She found herself on the street shortly after the detective's departure.

Marcia had disguised herself so as to deceive the practiced eye and flattered herself that she had accomplished her purposes.

Her escape from the trap had been opportune and miraculous.

Hiram Hercules had come in the nick of time, for Marble Mark was on his way to carry out the stern orders of the Black Tie, and if the ferret had not captured him on the street, he might have missed him altogether and Marcia would have stepped from the drama forever.

At the same time, though Marcia knew it not, Amie was looking for her.

The hatred that existed between these two women was terrible in its nature.

It was hate translated from the hills of the mining-camps to the heart of the great city. It had flourished in both places and Amie had sworn, with the mark of the Black Tie on her arm, to follow Marcia until she had paid her back for what she did in Sundown in helping the Nine Nabobs against the League.

The French girl—she was only half French, though we have called her differently because of her proficiency in the language—went out from the house in which she had buried herself after her late adventures, and was soon watching a certain place with the eye of a hawk.

Something seemed to tell her that her enemy was there.

But Marcia, dreamless of this espionage, was on the street and when Amie had watched some time only to grow impatient, she turned from the house and walked away.

"I will find her, never mind!" she whispered in hisses. "I won't give up this trail till I stand face to face with the Soft-Handed. Then it shall be deadlier than the ride across the desert—then it will be a shorter ride, but down through the shadows from which no one comes back."

Accident brought the two women together on the street.

The sharp eyes of Amie espied her victim and Marcia, standing on the sidewalk and in the light of a lamp, was seen by the French girl who fell back with clinched hands.

"I have found her. I am in luck. There is the Soft-Handed dreamless of my presence and I will show her that I am still the Cactus Belle though thousands of miles intervene between me and the mines."

Marcia starting off, with disappointment written on her face, was suddenly touched by a hand, and turning, she looked into the face of Amie Gleason.

The look the girl received told her that recognition was instant, but for a second the two enemies looked at one another without a word.

"Which way?" said Marcia with a smile, for she was cool while the other showed excitement in her eyes.

"Will you go home with me?"

"I will."

Still holding the sleeve she had touched, Amie turned and conducted Marcia down the street.

But few words were spoken by the foes until Amie had led her prisoner to her own room where she shut the door and turned upon her with the fury of a lioness.

"I have found you at last, have I?"

"I am Marcia and you are the Cactus Belle," was the quiet answer.

Amie stood off and looked at the woman who was as calm as a summer morn. She could not see how Marcia could be so calm under the circumstances, and the mystery was how she could look her in the eye and even smile.

"We haven't stood face to face for years!" continued Diamond Duke's sister.

"You are right; not for years."

"I haven't seen you since that night when we took the long ride on the underground tide that surges through the heart of the Uncrowned Angel."

"I think not."

"That was a journey as dread as the one you took over the desert. It had terrors which discounted those you met. Major Marmaduke, the last of the Nabobs, planned that trap with your help. You came to his assistance."

"I did. You and the Black Tie killed my husband Gold Hand, the third Nabob."

"The Black Tie did that."

"You belonged to it. You could have thwarted the band, but you did not."

"No!" cried Amie. "I did not. The Nabobs had to perish. They were ruling with a rod of iron and the death touch was all that could balk them."

"Very well; what do you want now?"

Amie came closer. She seemed to send from her dark eyes the hate of a lifetime.

Marcia glanced at the door.

"Oh!" cried Amie, "the door is locked. There is no escape for you. I have been hunting you ever since we parted in Sundown."

"You knew I was here. You knew I dwelt in this city, and yet you intimate that it has taken you all this time to find me."

"I didn't mean that, but I have found you and that is enough. We are going to settle the old score in this room."

Marcia smiled.

"So be it," she remarked. "I am ready."

The faultless figure of the Soft-Handed fell back from the table and her eyes looked across it at the girl who stood there with her face white and her lips strangely welded.

Amie seemed to see that she had met her match in this cool woman who had faced death before.

She watched her a moment and then crept around the table.

Marcia stood her ground, looking down into the blazing eyes of her enemy, and even let slip an eager expression which told that she was anxious to settle the old score once for all, and in that very room.

Suddenly Amie took from her pocket some-

thing which looked, at first, like a serpent, for it was dark and round.

It seemed to have a head, but the moment Marcia's eyes alighted upon it she covered it with her hand.

"You need not think that I am afraid of the sign which has made the Black Tie dreaded by strong men," she laughed. "That is the deadly coil you hold in your hand, but it is still in your possession and may never touch my throat."

A mad spring carried Amie toward her enemy, but the gloved hand of Marcia caught her wrist in mid-air, and she was held with a grip of iron, and in a position in which she was practically helpless.

In vain did Amie twist and fume.

She looked at Marcia and drew back, but the relentless hand held her firmly.

"I thought you were going to destroy me," cried Marcia. "I thought you were going to show me that you can kill like the rest of the League!"

Amie tried again to wrench herself from the hand that gripped her, and in her struggles the Black Tie fell to the floor.

In an instant Marcia had covered it with her foot and was looking at Amie with triumphant mien.

"You can go now. The hangman's noose awaits you!" cried Marcia suddenly releasing the Cactus Belle, and she fell back to the wall from whence she stared at her without a word.

The Soft-Handed stooped and picked up the cord, but all at once a cry was forced from her throat and she dropped it again.

Amie laughed outright.

"I am going now. If you want me you know that I am still in this city. I have escaped from the trap of the Black Tie and you can follow me if you wish. But beware, girl! The death of Gold Hand who might have been saved if you had but told the truth, makes us enemies forever. I don't want your blood, though. The State will take that when the man-hunter closes in on the Black Tie."

Marcia was at the door.

She turned the key which had been left in the lock and the next moment she was in the hallway.

The rage of the baffled tigress knew no bounds. She saw her enemy close the door, and heard the key which she had carried with her, click in the lock.

Marcia had locked her in!

"Beaten!" she exclaimed. "What a creature she is! I thought she would shrink from the Black Tie and become an easy victim, but it seemed to give her strength. It seemed to make Marcia stronger than ever. Her hand, though soft, has the clutch of a steel vise and she can hold one with a grip akin to death. I never saw her in such passion before. I could have saved Gold Hand, but I would not. What did she say about the hangman finishing me? Marcia is mad. She boasts without proof."

She at last broke the lock and went out.

She stood in the shadows for a moment and then started off.

There was to her step a lightness it had not had before.

"I don't see why I haven't heard anything about the man I shot in the little room. I don't see why I haven't heard of the death of Sandy Silas."

She was yet to learn that the shot had not killed the shoemaker of Sundown.

All at once Amie stopped and fell back from a man who at that moment crossed the sidewalk in front of her.

She knew the figure. She had gone to this man's door and had turned back without warning him by telling him what she knew about the mystery of Laban Joyce's death.

She had seen Hiram Hercules!

Something caused her to track the detective. She turned trailer and followed him.

More than once Amie ran her hand into the depths of her pocket, but did not draw anything out.

On, on she went.

"Whither is he going?" she asked herself. "I went to his den to tell him the truth and try to live an honest life from this time on. But I can't do that until I have settled with Marcia, the Soft-Handed. I won't tell this ferret anything. Let him find out. That is his work. He is a solver of secrets and let him solve this one."

The detective stopped at last.

"That used to be Sandy Silas's den," she exclaimed.

Hiram Hercules went down the steps and opened the little door at one time adorned with a tin sign saying that a man cobbled in the hovel beyond.

This time everything was silent.

Hiram walked in and stopped. He saw something lying on the dirty floor.

"I see why I was summoned to this place," he exclaimed, bending over the object which was human. "I have been brought to this spot to be told that the Black Tie is still at work."

He turned the body over and by the light which he had struck looked down into the face of the Shoemaker of Sundown.

"The wolves have turned on one another!" was all he said.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"THE MAN ON THE RIGHT."

A NOTE mysteriously delivered to the detective a short time previous had taken him to the shoemaker's den.

He knew that at one time Sandy Silas had cobbled there and he was prepared to see the evidences of crime.

When he bent nearer and looked down again into the drawn face of the man from Sundown he discovered a strange light in the eyes.

The man was not dead.

In a moment Hiram Hercules had closed the door which stood ajar and was back to the body.

Sandy Silas was still in the realm of the living and when Hiram lifted the body and carried it toward the door, he looked down into the face with a smile as if he felt that he had picked up a strong link in the chain of crime.

In less than half an hour a man lay on a cot in one of the hospital wards watched by a doctor who paid the patient the strictest attention.

A girlish figure had followed the ambulance to the very door of the building.

She had witnessed the detective's discovery and was watching the hospital with the eyes of a lynx.

"The fools failed!" she said. "Their failure was as miserable as my own. Sandy Silas must have as many lives as a cat. He will live and Hiram Hercules will hear all he knows."

Amie went back at last.

She wanted to penetrate to the spot where the shoemaker lay, but knew that she dared not make the attempt. Doctor Grimsby the man who had saved Hiram Hercules from the work of the Black Tie was at the patient's bedside and was bringing him back to life, while the detective had gone out to pursue the dark trails of the League.

The Broadway Sifter went back to the hovel where he had found Sandy Silas.

He knew that the shoemaker had not made that place his home for some days. But something had brought him back to the spot and he wanted to know what this was.

As he shut the door behind him he heard a slight noise and without striking a match, he turned and held his breath.

He recalled the time when he waited in Feathers's room for the man who had searched it with Feathers lying dead on his cot. He stood deep in the shadows that prevailed where he was and wondered who had come to Sandy Silas's old den and for what.

But the footsteps did not enter; they drew back as if their maker was satisfied with a glance across the threshold and when the detective slipped out and up the stone steps, he saw a figure moving off.

He noted the broad shoulders of the man and the good garments in which the form was clad and then went back to the work before him.

Ten minutes later he was ready to quit the place.

The old den of the shoemaker of Sundown had revealed but little to the ferret of Gotham.

He stood on the street with the night wind blowing on his cheeks and five minutes later he was going back to his own room.

"Captain Hercules?"

The detective suddenly drew up and looked at the person who had spoken.

It was Gerald Green.

"Still on the trail?" said the young man.

"Why not?" asked Hiram.

"I want you. I have changed my mind. I believe we can hang the guilty."

"You do, eh? I thought—"

"No matter what you thought. I have changed my opinion of you, I say. We will drop in here. I know of no better place in this neighborhood."

Gerald led the detective into a restaurant which had private stalls and grasping his arm as he leaned forward, continued in eager tones:

"I have had the secret revealed! I know who killed Laban Joyce."

"You do, eh?" cried Hiram Hercules. "You are sure of this, are you, Mr. Green?"

"I am. I have heard it from a member of the Black Tie. Portia never knew the secret of the sign of death. It was impossible for her to place it where it was found that morning—on her father's throat. The girl is innocent, thank God!"

There was no reply for a moment. Hiram Hercules looked at the speaker and seemed to doubt his sanity.

"Who told you this? Which one of the Black Tie turned traitor and gave the rest away?"

"It was the man called Sandy Silas."

"The man who now lies in the hospital at the point of death?"

"What sent him thither?"

"The Black Tie, of course. He was struck by the Order he served and betrayed."

"But he told me. He sold me the secret for five hundred dollars."

"When?"

"Not two hours ago."

"You gave him that amount, did you, for the secret he said he carried?"

"I did."
 "Well?"
 "He says that the French girl is the guilty one."
 Hiram Hercules looked at the eager Gerald with an incredulous smile.
 "Did you believe him, Gerald Green?"
 "Why not? He was almost ready to swear it."
 "What was his proof? What proof did he give you to substantiate the charge that the hand of Amie took Laban Joyce, the last nabob, out of the world?"
 Gerald Green seemed to gasp.
 "He offered no proof beyond the fact that he seemed to believe what he said."
 "Oh, he didn't, eh?"
 "He knows that the clock didn't strike that night. He told me all about the fight for supremacy in Sundown; how after the vanishment of Diamond Duke and his sister, who is this same Amie, the ninth Nabob stole away and vanished, too; how, after years, all turned up in this city to resume the fight for power and revenge. I listened to his story as I had never before listened to a startling tale. It held me spellbound."
 "But it cost you five-hundred dollars?"
 "The secret of the murder did."
 "Amie did it. This pretty girl who taught Portia French and who could pay divinely! She was the deadly serpent in the nest. She is the person I should track down and hand over to Justice?"
 Gerald Green did not speak. He watched the detective while he reflected in audible tones and seemed to wonder what his reflections meant.
 "I'll see about this," said the ferret at last, looking up into the young man's face.
 "You will? Is that all?" cried Gerald exasperatingly. "Do you mean to convey to me the idea that you don't believe what Sandy Silas said?"
 "That man is no better than his kind," answered the ferret.
 "But he declared—"
 "That Amie killed Major Marmaduke? I know."
 "My God, man! you don't mean to throw Portia back into the shadows of suspicion?"
 "I don't, but you have no proof of the French girl's crime beyond the unsubstantiated story of this man who wanted money for a certain purpose."
 Gerald Green seemed to have a new light break in upon him. He fell back in his chair and appeared to shiver.
 "Everything is against me!" he cried. "You are bound to bring it home to her. You won't take but the one trail. You tell me that she isn't guilty, yet you don't want to prove it. Do you know that this play must come to a close? I will take the trail myself. I will turn ferret if it goes on this way any longer. There was a black mark on Major Marmaduke's throat. It was the accursed sign of the mountain League which has been transplanted to this city. I know what the man Sandy Silas wanted with the money I paid him. He intended to get beyond the clutches of the Black Tie. He was a fugitive from its grip while he talked to me."
 "He is a fugitive still. He may be dead by this time."
 "You must see him."
 "I have seen him. It was I who found him with the mark of the Tie upon his person. I had him taken to the hospital."
 "You must find Amie, the murderess."
 "There is no murderess."
 "The old assertion!"
 "I tell you, Gerald Green, there is no murderess in this game. I don't care what Sandy Silas told you. I care not what Amie says she saw and heard that night. But I will find her. I will unearth this cunning girl, though she may face me with sealed lips."
 "By heavens! I will open them. Send for me if you can't master her."
 "If I can't master her, I will," promised the detective.
 Gerald Green rose and watched for a moment the immobile face of Hiram Hercules.
 "Look here. You told me once that Portia had confessed, yet you have never said what she confessed to."
 The handsome face above him grew white.
 "You don't want me to know it, do you?" Hiram went on. "You want me to crack every nut myself, and that when you have the hammer in your hand."
 Slowly Gerald came back to his chair.
 "I will tell you. It is a terrible story. I will make it brief, for to mention it is torture to me. Portia quarreled with her parent that night. It was about our affairs. She even, in an ebullition of wrath, threatened his life. That night she found herself in the hallway near the library door. She has no recollection of getting up and going down. Shuddering, she crept up-stairs to her room and went to bed. It was two o'clock in the morning, as she afterward recalled when she told me all. You know Amie said she heard the steeple clock strike two?"
 "But she did not. That clock was out of repair."
 "Portia seemed to have passed some time in a

strange trance that night. She knew when she found herself in the hall at the library door; but she has no recollection of quitting her room. She discovered, the next morning, that murder had been committed. Then the whole thing flashed through her brain. She believed herself guilty of the deed. You haven't forgotten how she surprised you in my room when you first came to see me, and how, crying out that I should not aid you, she fell in a swoon at my feet?"
 "I recollect."
 "I have believed her guilty. The quarrel that night, the fact that Portia went down to the door of the library, and other things, have fastened in my soul the terrible belief that the crime was hers. But the shoemaker of Sundown threw across the darkness the first real ray it has had. I took hope at your promise that Portia should be brought up out of the shadows; but now you doubt the man's story; you don't believe that Amie did the deed."
 "I believe her innocent."
 "But she is the sister of the Man from Montana—the man whom we have not as yet seen in person in this drama of crime."
 "I have seen him," remarked Hiram Hercules. "I have felt the touch of this man's hand. I know who he is and what he is. I have seen this director of the hand of death. I know where the chief of the Black Tie hides."
 "But why don't you strike?"
 "I want another link or so."
 "They will find you!"
 "They have found me. You want to have Amie found. I will find this girl. I want her anyhow. I want to see the sister of the Man from Montana."
 The two men left the restaurant almost together.
 As Hiram Hercules stepped upon the sidewalk a man who stood near by touched another on the shoulder and whispered with his lips at his ear:
 "The one on the right is the man. The other one is not dangerous just now."
 The "man on the right" was the detective of Gotham.

CHAPTER XXVII.
 THE MONTANIAN'S COOL HAND.

THE Man from Montana as Diamond Duke was called lived in a house which he inhabited all alone.
 It had been his home off and on during his stay in the city and few people not connected with the Black Tie knew that he dwelt there.
 This man had played a cool hand nearly all his life. He had risen to fame as the head of the Secret League which had cursed Sundown almost from the moment of its birth and had seen the Nabobs fall before the Brethren of the Tie.
 It was purely vengeance which had united these men. They had come together among the wild Silver Hills and with that tenacity with which man sometimes fights man they had held together fighting the Nabobs who came to Sundown and ruled it, as all said, with a rod of iron.
 There is no other way to rule tough men.
 The Black Tie had grown stronger and stronger all the time. It had flourished at the very door of the Nabobs' cabins and they had felt its hand only to perish with the dread mark at their throats.
 An hour after the appearance of Hiram Hercules and Gerald Green on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant, Diamond Duke entered his luxurious room and threw himself upon a chair at the table.
 He did not wear a mask now. There seemed no need of this, for the Man from Montana was at home and Major Marmaduke was rotting in the tomb of the last of the Nabobs.
 In one corner of the apartment was a safe, the doors of which looked impregnable.
 Diamond Duke threw a glance toward the safe and then crossed the room.
 He opened the steel doors and took from the innermost recesses of the safe a package which he carried to the table. This package was covered with red leather and was longer than his hand and not much thicker.
 The Man from Montana opened it by untying the cord and threw it on the table before him.
 "I'll take time and look at this now," he observed. "I'll see what the girl, Dot, was treasuring and guarding as she guarded her life. It may not be as valuable to me as I have thought, but if it came from Feathers's hands, it is worth something."
 Diamond Duke looked through the papers one by one. He went over them carefully and now and then seemed to start.
 "It's a complete history," he said, aloud, at last, without looking up. "The old man didn't miss the smallest incident. He went over the whole ground and everything is here. He details Marcia's ride across the desert, as if he accompanied her. He doesn't omit anything at all. I didn't know he was capable of getting up a narrative like this. I am simply amazed."
 It took him more than an hour to read what he found in the red package.
 "The girl knows nothing of these things," he

continued. "She is not aware of the truth. She suspects, but yet she does not know. She called Feathers her friend, but does not know that he was her father. Dot is beautiful and young. Portia is older than she and just as beautiful. One has money in her hands, the other has nothing."
 What was Diamond Duke thinking about?
 "It is worth the chance? I have played bold hands before. I know the circumstances of these two women. I know the possibilities. I am master of the situation. Why not?"
 He took the papers and tied them up again. He replaced the package and relocked the steel safe.
 Glancing at his watch, he noted the time with a smile and donned a light overcoat.
 Half an hour later he was ringing the bell at the door of Portia's home.
 With the coolness of Satan this Man from Montana whose life had been strangely interwoven with Laban Joyce's past, stood on the steps of the millionaire's mansion, toying with the ends of his delicate gloves while he waited for an answer to his knocking.
 The hour was not late and he knew that the inmates of the mansion were still up, for a soft light was seen in the parlor and presently footsteps came to the portal.
 When the door opened Diamond Duke looked into the face which presented itself and extended a card.
 The new maid looked at it and seemed to say with the glance she gave him that it was a very late call.
 "Take that to your mistress. She will see me," remarked the man, already in the hall.
 In another minute he was asked to walk into the parlor.
 As the figure of the maid vanished up-stairs, Diamond Duke was ushered into a sumptuous parlor and stood erect under the light while he looked into the face of an astonished woman.
 Portia had risen and stood before him.
 The child of the last Nabob was tall and beautiful, with a figure that was grace itself and a mien thoroughly captivating. She still showed signs of the terrible experience through which she had passed, and while she looked at the Man from Montana she seemed to wonder what could have brought him to her home.
 "I cannot imagine to whom I am indebted for this call," she spoke, looking at the card which she still held in her hand and upon which was the name "Duke Gwynn," nothing more.
 The dark eyes studying her seemed to emit an eager light.
 "The name on my card may tell you nothing," was the answer. "It is the name of its owner and that is not much. I have called on a matter of business connected in a manner with the recent events through which you have passed."
 A shiver of aversion to the subject, a sudden loss of color, told that the fair creature heard every word, but this did not stop the master spirit of the Black Tie.
 "You don't know me," he went on. "I can be your best friend. I hold in my hands the web of fate so far as you are concerned."
 "Do you mean—"
 Portia stopped.
 "I mean that I can clear up this mystery—that, if you will recognize me, I can dissipate every shadow and brighten the skies above your head."
 "If that is your mission you need proceed no further."
 Portia spoke with firmness and her eyes riveted on the man in the middle of the room told that he was destined to make poor headway at that time.
 He cast a rapid glance around the room.
 "It was in your room—in the library, wasn't it?" he observed, looking toward the door which opened into the scene of the murder.
 "It happened in the library," answered Portia with another shudder.
 "I thought so. Would you let me see the place?"
 "I cannot. I have locked it up. I haven't been in there for days. I have said that I will never cross its threshold again."
 "You don't fear the shadows there, do you?"
 "It is not that. It is the awful recollection of that night's work. You would not ask me to show you that room if you could realize the state of my mind."
 Diamond Duke merely smiled and seemed to take no note of what Portia said.
 "I will not press the subject," he continued. "No, I will not press the matter. You have your own thoughts and I will not rob you of them."
 The Nabob's child started forward with something on her lips, but she stopped short.
 "What mean you?" she cried when she caught her breath. "What mean those terrible insinuating words?"
 His reply was a look and his handsome face seemed to get the expression of a fiend's.
 "No, I will not disturb you, but there are those who will unless you place yourself in the hands of friends," he exclaimed. "I know something about this crime. Let me see. At what hour did you come down-stairs that night?"

There was a cry and the figure of Portia seemed to reel from the Man from Montana.

"I hope I didn't shock you? It was about two in the morning, wasn't it? You came down the steps softly after the quarrel the preceding night? You left your couch and crept into the corridor and down the steps with the motions of a Borgia in the palace. You were all alone and the house was quiet. He was there yet. He sat at the table where you had left him. He didn't see you open the door and he never knew you had come in until—"

Portia broke the sentence with a shriek.

"Man or demon, stop where you are!" she cried. "What have I done to deserve this?"

Diamond Duke eyed her with a lurking smile at his lips.

He seemed to know that he would win in the end. He watched every motion she made and took note of every shudder and glance.

"I was merely describing what happened that night to refresh your memory," he resumed. "Yes, you slipped into the library with the noiselessness of a panther. You glided across the floor and did not stop until you stood over him."

"No more!" cried Portia. "This is torture enough. I admit that I was up that night, that I left my room, that I even went down the staircase, but I did not kill him!"

"You did not, eh? No, you did not because you say so. You saw him in the library; you found him dead there the next morning. No, you did not commit the deed, because you are a woman. Is that it?"

She seemed to have grown into a statue of marble before the Man from Montana.

Diamond Duke was now almost sure of his prey. He let her speak first.

"You have come hither for a purpose. I know you have deliberately planned to blight my life. It is the opening of the conspiracy."

"What conspiracy?"

"The plot of the dread Black Tie!"

"Ah! you speak in riddles now. What about this Black Tie? You must be explicit."

Portia was losing strength for she was gasping again.

The battle was nearly over.

"You don't know what you are hinting at. In the desperation of your situation, you are grasping at a straw. You do not know me. We have never stood face to face until now. You accuse me of trying to blight your life. You forget what took place after you slipped down the staircase that night."

"Man, you are mad!"

Diamond Duke with the coolness of the desperado folded his arms and fell back a step.

"I will now come to business. This secret is mine as well as yours but I will compromise. You will become my wife or you will find the veil lifted so that the world may see."

What an impudent hand he was playing! How coolly he played it with the beautiful girl, the Nabob's heiress within a few feet of him and her eyes riveted upon him.

Had he lost?

Portia seemed to fall from him and for a moment turned away. A whiter face this man of plots had never seen.

"Your wife?" cried Portia, turning suddenly. "Your wife to save myself from the gallows? I can't! I went down the staircase that night, but I was not myself when I did so. I may have killed him. I don't know. Heaven helping me, I will become the wife of no one who believes me guilty."

She sunk into a chair and looked at him while he stood erect studying her with his cruel eyes.

"I have won!" he said to himself. "This girl is in my hands despite what she says. I have played the hand I thought would rake in the stakes and they are mine."

Portia saw him move toward the door. Without a word she watched him open it and pass out into the hall.

"I will see you again. Do nothing rash. Remember! I hold your destiny in my hands!" he exclaimed and she saw him vanish.

Diamond Duke went back to his sumptuous room. He looked once at the steel safe as he glided toward the table and the next moment sprung forward and picked up a bit of paper lying on the floor at the foot of the door.

The next moment he had flung back the heavy portal and with a cry recoiled.

The steel safe had been plundered.

The red package was gone!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BACK AMONG THE TIGERS.

THE plundering of the safe was so plain that a glance had told Diamond Duke all.

Nothing was missing but the red package—the one which contained Feathers's story of Sundown, and which was not to have been opened until Dot had reached her nineteenth year.

For some time the Man from Montana looked at the empty compartment.

It was hard for him to realize that he had been robbed, yet the proofs were there, and the absence of the package told him enough.

He shut the door and rose to his feet, standing

there a moment before he went back to the table.

"This is the hand of the enemy," he said in hoarse tones. "This is a stroke by the opposition. There is a woman who would do this, and a man, as well. But how could he do it when I set Marble Mark after him, with instructions to see that he is swept out of the way, and that the man of trails no more threatens the ending of our game?"

He waited for some one who did not come.

An hour passed and Diamond Duke was the sole occupant of the parlor, with the unlocked safe to tell him in mute language that the plunderer had come and gone.

"It may not be too late. I must see whither the trail leads," he exclaimed. "I have played detective and hunter before now. Why can't I find the thief?"

Out of the house and down the street glided the Man from Montana.

The city seemed to swallow him despite its thousand-and-one lights, but he avoided all those who looked twice at him, and drew his body into a small opening, which admitted him into a house on a quiet street.

It was the house of the Black Tie—the same one to which he had escorted Amie on a former occasion, and shown her the corridor which led underground to the river.

He opened the door leading to the steps, and went down the flight to the dark passage.

Again his figure was thrown in grotesque shadows on the wall of the secret room of the Black Tie.

The light he turned on showed him the dais, the staff, and the black ball poised on top of it.

Diamond Duke, now with a black mask concealing his face, lest some prowling spy should see him, stood for a little while in the place, and then sought the furthest wall.

Touching an unseen button there, he saw a door swing back, and he stepped into the passage.

From here he caught the dank exhalations of the river.

As he leaned into the place he saw a light flit past the mouth of the tunnel, and a rat ran across his feet.

"Nothing here that I can see," he remarked. "It is as gloomy here as the tombs of the Capulets. But it is near the hour, and if they are faithful they will come."

He shut the door and was turning back when a cry startled him and he whirled to see a portal at the other end of the chamber of the Tie open and a woman's figure sprung into the room.

Diamond Duke stopped, drew a revolver and then watched the form he had sighted.

"I am here at last! What is there left but this—to perish here where they will never look for me!"

He had recognized the speaker. She stood in the chamber and was looking at the black ball as if it had for her the fascination of a serpent's eye.

"Amie?"

The woman recoiled, then seeing the immobile man against the wall tried to open the door through which she had entered the subterranean den.

"Don't go. I want you. I haven't seen you since you gave us the slip."

The Man from Montana advanced and the woman at whom he looked never stirred.

"You have come back to the castle alone, have you? I believe I did show you this place once and what is behind the wall."

"Merciful God! I have seen enough of this game. I have taken all the part in it I dare. I have stood face to face with Marcia, the Soft-Handed and she outwitted me."

"You should have looked for that. If you attempted to get even with her single-handed, you should have looked for defeat. I am the person who can break the force of that soft hand. I am the only one who can give her over to your vengeance. I sent her down over the desert one night—"

"But she came back! yes, she came back!" cried Amie with a laugh which sounded out of place in that chamber.

"I know that," he answered harshly. "She came back because Satan helped her. Girl, have you betrayed us?"

His look seemed enough to kill and she cowered for a moment against the cold wall.

"You have withdrawn yourself from the post where I stationed you," Diamond Duke went on. "You would not stay there though I believe you did go back. The next thing you will be telling this detective all."

Amie wondered while the dark eyes transfixed her if their owner knew that she had seen Hiram Hercules. She wondered, too, if he knew what had happened since she abandoned the League to its fate, leaving it to fight out alone and without her aid, the battle with the man-hunter of Gotham.

"We don't want traitresses with us," he continued. "Amie, I have been lenient. In Sundown you played a double hand."

"But I was true in the end."

"Yes, when we forced you to be true," he smiled.

"Mercy! Let me go. Give me liberty now and I will swear—"

"A woman's promise, eh?"

"You know what I am to you. But little of the world knows it. The people who pass us by never dream that I am your sister—that the same mother loved us both."

"Amie, I am not here to punish."

She seemed to start up with a cry of joy.

"You are free, though you have had treachery in your heart. You are given a lease of life, but you must obey."

She looked at him and would have seized his hands if he had not repulsed her.

"Listen, girl. There is work for you. You must find the lost girl for me."

"Dot?"

"Dot, the girl who lived in the house on C—street until a short time ago."

"I know where she is now."

"You do?"

"I saw her face at a window this very day. I could not have been mistaken."

"You must make sure of it. See that you surely locate the girl. I have trusted you on the trail before. I know what you can do there. You must not let Dot get out of your sight."

"When I locate her, what?"

"Come to me with the information."

For a second she looked at Diamond Duke and then exclaimed:

"Is the game nearly played out? When will it end and we all go back to Sundown?"

"What, do you long for the accursed mountains of Silver-land? Do you want to go back where we fought the Nine Nabobs, and where we took that terrible ride down the underground Styx which flows through the Uncrowned Angel?"

"Anywhere but here!" exclaimed Amie. "I have not had a peaceful day since we came hither to fight it out with the last Nabob."

"I have had many," he laughed.

"You? yes, you may have had such, but you don't know what I have endured. I am tired—tired almost of life."

Diamond Duke watched her a while longer, and then led her from the chamber. In the room above he stopped and noticed that she was looking up into his face with a strange yearning look.

"I will find this girl for you. Yes, I will locate Dot, Feathers's child. But you can't hide the truth from me. I have ferreted it out."

"You have? What have you discovered?"

"It is about Dot."

In an instant he had caught her wrist.

"By heavens! I believe you have been playing spy where you were not to watch at all!" he cried.

"I have been inquisitive. I couldn't help it. I have been looking into Dot's history. I know who Dot is."

There was no reply.

"What are you going to do with the girl when I find her for you?" continued Amie. "Will you harm her?"

"Never mind. I may conclude to make a golden princess out of her. But where did you discover these things?"

Once more Amie drew back the length of his arm.

"I will not tell you that," she said, defiantly. "I will seal my lips whenever you ask me such questions. Instead of wanting to find Dot, you should look elsewhere."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you forgotten that a ferret is on the trail—that he has been there ever since the last of the Nabobs died?"

"Pish! I fear no man-hunters now. We are safe. The Black Tie is triumphant at last. There is no foe in its way."

Amie's eyes seemed to bulge from her head.

"You don't mean that. You forget that this man, called Hiram Hercules, is still picking up link by link the chain he ever forges. You overlook the fact that he has Gerald Green to help him, that Marcia is still in the drama—"

"There is nothing of this—nothing of it, at least, for us to fear now. Marcia may be in the game, but she is harmless. Without the help of Hiram Hercules she is harmless, I tell you; and she no longer has that man to aid her."

"When did they quarrel?"

"There has been no quarrel."

"Then, Diamond Duke, you have overshot your mark. Marcia and this human blood-hound are leagued together for the destruction of the Black Tie and the solving of the Nabob Mystery."

She wondered why he laughed with such intonations of victory.

She had to look at him wondering what could make him appear so triumphant.

"Go on, then, and fight it out!" she exclaimed.

"If you fear not the tireless detective—if you think you have silenced him—you may triumph and make the Black Tie as dreaded here as it was in Sundown. But I tell you that Marcia and Hiram Hercules have united against us. This is the stern truth."

Diamond Duke looked at his watch and mentally noted the hour.

"By this time there is no Hiram Hercules, de-

tective," he said and she then knew what he had meant all along.

"If that is true you are safe; if false you are lost!" she answered with a toss of her head.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE HAND THAT ROBBED DIAMOND DUKE.

The visit of the Man from Montana to Portia had cost him dearly.

If he had remained at home he might have seen the person who came with stealthy strides to plunder the safe and deprive him of the red package.

He had never thought of Hiram Hercules when his mind went back to that deed. Why should he? Had he not touched Marble Mark on the arm and pointed out to the executioner of the Black Tie the detective as he emerged from the restaurant stall with Gerald Green?

Let us go back and see into whose hands the precious package had fallen.

The detective after separating from Portia's lover was watched by the man who had been baffled by him when he was commissioned to play the deadly card on Marcia shut up in the old house with the dead dog.

The ferret passed down the street with the man at his heels.

Marble Mark had something to work for now.

He had failed before; this man had baffled him, and now he was to silence forever the indefatigable shadow and brush him from the pathway of the Black Tie.

Hiram, always on the watch since he knew something of the nature of the League which had been transplanted from the Silver Hills to New York, was on the alert as much as ever.

He had promised to find Amie for Gerald; not only this, but he had pledged himself anew to the task of rescuing Portia from the shadows that seemed to hem her in.

He thought he knew where to look for the French teacher known to him as the Cactus Belle.

He went home first. As he climbed the staircase he did not see the man who had never lost sight of him from the moment when his master, the Man from Montana, set him on his trail.

A man who did not look like Hiram Hercules came down the flight and passed into the street. Marble Mark looked and shook his head.

"He will come out soon and then I will follow him till I play my hand," he muttered. "He baffled me before by saving Marcia, the Soft-Handed, and I will pay him back for that little game. Let that man go. I don't want him. I am after the bloodhound who is pitted against the Black Tie.

Marble Mark stood there a long time.

He watched the open hallway for more than an hour, not dreaming that Hiram Hercules had walked off within a few feet of him and had passed so close that, if he had known him, he could have touched him with his eager hand.

But the lights and shadows of Gotham seemed to have blinded the man on guard and instead of being in his office, Hiram Hercules was on his way to make a play which for its boldness surpassed anything he had lately engaged in.

He turned up at the door of Diamond Duke's house.

The bell which he rung brought him no response, and he waited for some one to open the portal, but waited in vain.

The Man from Montana was even then facing Portia with the coolness for which he was famed. He had entered the house of the Nabob, and was telling the heiress there that unless she became his bride, the sword suspended over her head would fall and blight her life at its budding.

No one seemed to see the man at the Black Tie's door.

The detective stood awhile longer, and believing that he had found Diamond Duke out, he opened the door with a key which he took from his pocket, and stood fearless in the darkened hallway.

To find the parlor and then the private room of the Man from Montana was no task for the keen ferret of the metropolis.

In another moment he stood before the steel safe, with the soft light of the little jet over the table showing him his rich surroundings, for Diamond Duke had surrounded him with the splendor of a nabob's abode.

The detective searched the room rapidly, but with care.

Nothing seemed to escape his eye. He knew the danger by which he was surrounded. He knew what would happen if the door should open and the head of the League return.

But Diamond Duke came not.

The steel safe was one of the last places visited.

With a cool head and eager hands the detective, who had spent a good part of his life tricking the burglar and the housebreaker, stooped before the door of the safe and began work upon it.

It had been purchased not so much for absolute safety as for durability and strength.

He opened it with an ease that would have astonished the Man from Montana.

Opening the various compartments beyond the doors, his eyes fell upon a package wrapped

in red cloth, and with a spring his hand closed upon it, and he drew it forth.

"Why didn't you destroy this?" he asked, half aloud. "This is the turning point in the game—this is the turn in the lane of guilt."

The package went from the safe to the ferret's bosom. It was hidden there, and he rose, and after another quick look through the safe, he shut the doors and turned away.

Diamond Duke had been plundered by the man he hated if not feared, and when that quiet figure left the house of the Black Tie he carried off the proof of his cleverness in a package which had cost the League some fine playing against a girl—Feathers's child Dot.

Leaving the house unwatched, for perhaps Marble Mark was still on guard on Broadway, Hiram Hercules entered a quiet place where in a small room, scantily furnished, he took the prize from his bosom and looked at the seal.

It had been broken. Some hand had tampered with it and some eye for whom it had not been intended by the dead man, had read what was hidden inside.

He opened the package and let the contents fall in a heap on the clothless table.

He read the first page that met his gaze; he saw at once that it was startling, thrilling in its nature; that it was the story of the drama of the Nine Nabobs told in detail and written in a poor hand, as if the pen which had traced the letters was not used to such labor.

But he read on and on. The hours passed and still Hiram Hercules did not fold the sheets and get up.

It was late when he finally rose. His face told that he had picked up another link.

He put the package back in his bosom. He went out and turned rapidly the first corner he found. In another minute he had hailed a cab and was being taken rapidly through the city.

"Where is Dot, your guest?" he cried, to a woman who opened a door to his ring.

"She has just retired."

"Tell her to dress and come down. I want to see her."

The detective's sister went out and after awhile the figure of Dot came in.

She entered the room with wonderment in her deep eyes and when she saw Hiram Hercules she started forward, but stopped before she reached him.

For a full minute the ferret looked at her as if studying her from head to foot and then he exclaimed:

"Do you know anything about your early life, Dot?"

"But little," she answered him amazed. "I can't tell you anything definite."

"Do you know who Feathers was?"

"He was my friend and, I have sometimes thought, my—"

"Your father? Isn't that what you were going to say?"

Dot lost color.

"Yes, my father. He gave me a red package which I was not to open until I was nineteen, and I could open it now, for yesterday was my birthday; but I have lost the package. It was taken from me by the men into whose trap I fell."

"Do you know that you are not Dot?—that you are, in fact—"

"Tell me nothing!" broke in the girl. "Tell me nothing, I say. I am content to remain nameless if I can remain here in this house."

Hiram Hercules seemed to pity the fair creature who looked at him in speechless fear.

"Then I will keep what I know," he observed. "Time enough yet."

"But you have a secret. You have found something."

"Yes, I have found the red package."

Dot sprung up and held out her hands.

"Give it to me, then. Let me have what is mine by his giving. I am nineteen and the package shall be opened by my hands."

"But it has been opened. Did you think that the man who decoyed you would not open it?"

"I could not think that. They broke the seal, did they?"

"The seal was broken when it fell into my hands. I have read it, too."

Dot seemed to recoil to where the ferret's sister stood.

"You must remain here. You are still wanted by the League—by the Black Tie of Sundown. The game goes on, but the murder mystery of the avenue is not so deep as it was."

She did not appear to comprehend him.

"I will give you the package another time," he remarked.

"I leave everything with you," was the reply. "You know best."

With another look at the girl, Hiram Hercules passed out. He walked within a few feet of a woman crouching in the shadows of the buildings, a woman with keen black eyes. She started up and followed him.

"So he still lives despite what Diamond Duke told me. He said he should be brushed from the path, yet here he is, and I am sure he has seen the girl whose face I saw at the window."

Amie could have touched the detective by a spring, but she held off. She let him pass on while she looked back at the house as if, to

mark it and then, after awhile went to the adventure with Diamond Duke in the underground chamber.

The ferret of Gotham turned up in his own office, but Marble Mark was no longer on guard.

That man had turned back and was in another part of the city. He had failed to find the detective, but had discovered that Hiram had given him the slip.

Baffled the second time by the detective, the executioner of the Black Tie looked his disappointment and went through a dark street to enter a house and there shut himself in.

"Why pursue this human tiger any longer?" he cried. "The game can't be won against him. I never saw his like. He turns up where you don't look for him and while you watch his nest he passes out right under your nose and you see him not. This man can't be beaten. I see that. I am a fool if I try it any longer. I remember my last orders. I hear them yet and the threat that accompanied them. Why not go off and leave the captain and the two to fight it out alone? I don't want to see open for me the doors of that infernal prison up the river. There is no escaping the final grip of the detective. The Black Tie can't resist his cunning."

He destroyed some things which he took from a locked chest and then disguised himself by clipping the handsome mustache that adorned his face.

"You may fight it out with the ferret alone, captain," he went on. "I am off. I am out of this game. The Black Tie can't flourish in New York as it flourished in Sundown. The hand of the cool-headed Hiram Hercules is against it and that is fatal. We can't win with this man on the trail. There's no telling when the dragnet will be pulled in. I won't take the chances."

Nothing that would tell who had dwelt in that little room remained when the figure of Marble Mark moved toward the door.

His hand was on the knob and he was opening the portal for what was to be the last time when he heard a noise and then a footstep in the hall.

In another second he had thrown the door wide and was looking into the corridor.

"Just in time, eh? Heavens! I thought—"

Marble Mark laughed.

"Is that you, Black Burt?" he exclaimed with a chuckle. "Don't you know me? I was just going out."

The two men stood face to face; the brothers of the Black Tie looked at one another with curious smiles.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE SOFT-HANDED IS MERCIFUL.

THE two men in the hallway seemed to talk with their eyes.

Marble Mark led the way back to the room and they sat down.

Black Burt broached the subject nearest his heart and the other could not keep back a laugh.

"I am tired of this. I am going to get out of this ferret's way. We can't fight this man. There was a time when we fought and mastered the Nine Nabobs. We did that with cleverness, and though they were cool and cunning and had one half of Sundown at their backs, we met and sent them over the mountain to the graveyard. But this man! We can't find him when he is wanted. I have hunted him high and low. I have discovered that we can't meet Hiram Hercules where we would have to meet him to win. There is nothing like knowing where you are to fight a man and when. Diamond Duke can fight out the game if he wishes. The Black Tie can't be badgered and cornered and then win the toss. We have the woman still looking for us—the one we sent over the desert. She is the detective's ally."

Marble Mark knew this and said so. He knew that Marcia the Soft-Handed was with Hiram Hercules in his fight against the Black Tie.

"Let's toss for results," suddenly cried Black Burt drawing a coin from his pocket and balancing it on his finger.

There was no answer.

Marble Mark made up his mind as to what he was going to do. He didn't seem to care what became of his companion.

Black Burt threw the coin toward the dingy ceiling.

"Heads fight, tails flight!" he cried as he watched it scintillate in the lamp for a moment.

It fell back upon the floor with a ring and rolled to one side of the room. With the eagerness of a boy the desperado pruned after the coin and bent over it.

"It is tails!" he cried. "It has decided for me. I am no longer connected with the Black Tie."

With the coin in his hand, he came toward Marble Mark and resumed:

"We are going off, you and I. We will not see the ending of this game of vengeance and gold. What do you think the captain will say?"

"I care not what he says," was the quick response. "This is a case of self-preservation."

"Yes, but I would like to find a certain party first."

"Marcia?"

"Marcia!" answered Black Burt. "I would like to stand face to face once more with this woman. You recollect the night we sent her over the desert? She resisted the tying and all at once, catching up a whip, lashed me across the face, each blow seeming to send the infernal cord to the bones. I wanted to return the compliment then and there, but Diamond Duke held me off."

Marble Mark smiled.

"I recall the incident," he replied. "Well, if you want to see Marcia before you go—if you really want to tell her about that lashing, I will give you her whereabouts."

"You can't do that, can you?"

"I know where she is. I have ferreted her out if I have done nothing else."

Black Burt awaited the information with undisguised eagerness.

Marble Mark told him where he thought he would find Marcia, the Soft-Handed, and they left the house.

On the sidewalk among the shadows there they parted, each going his own way, and promising to meet once more before quitting the city forever.

"Be careful!" admonished Marble Mark as Black Burt walked off with danger in his eyes. "You know this woman. You have seen her tried when it took nerve enough to try the toughest man."

"I'll recollect," was the answer flung back and he saw Black Burt no more.

The last named man, eager to find the woman called Marcia, the Soft-Handed, hurried toward the place mentioned by Marble Mark. There was a consuming fire at his heart. He felt again the smarting of the cuts delivered by Marcia the night she was made a desert Mazeppa by the Black Tie, and he could not quit the city nor desert the League without seeing her again.

He had made up his mind as to what he would do with this woman.

He had thought it over and was ready to wreak his vengeance and, flying from the hand of the detective, leave behind him a new mystery, and, at the same time, the vengeance of one of the dark League of the Silver Hills.

In course of time Black Burt reached the house designated by Marble Mark.

The executioner of the Black Tie had found the woman in the game; by accident he had been enabled to track Marcia home and had marked well perhaps for future revenge the place she inhabited.

Nothing but vengeance brooded in Black Burt's heart. He hated this woman whom Amie had tracked down, but who had escaped from her hands. He remembered the night among the mines and thought over the ride Marcia had taken over the cactus trails of the wild Southwest.

It was a little house on a dark street, just the sort of a building where a woman like Marcia would hide. Black Burt knew nothing of the interior arrangements of the house, but he was sure he could find the woman he sought.

Once inside he stood for a moment in the dim hallway and watched the staircase that rose before him. She was up-stairs, he was almost sure of that. Somewhere in the upper story of that silent house slept the object of his last stroke.

Black Burt, burly of figure, yet having the characteristics of the prowling panther, went up the steps and halted in the cramped hall overhead.

Before him he saw a door and beyond it a glimmer of light.

His hands opened and shut with eagerness. There was something which he drew from his pocket, something dark and snake-like.

He wrapped this object round his fingers and moved toward the portal.

There he stopped and listened.

Everything was silent beyond the door.

But some one was there; yes, in the room ahead was a woman, for by drawing his figure up to the transom and looking over it into the apartment he saw Marcia alone in the chamber.

The man dropped back catlike to the floor. He wanted to open the door and, bursting in upon the Soft-Handed, surprise and take her captive before she could resist.

But finding the door locked by a gentle manipulation of the latch, he proceeded to knock.

In an instant he heard a chair move and footsteps came toward the door.

Black Burt fell back and waited.

Marcia might be expecting the detective himself. What a surprise he had in store for her.

The door opened and Black Burt saw before him and in the light of the gas the full figure of the very woman he wanted.

But he saw more than this.

He saw a hand go up so quick that he could not resist, and at the ends of the white fingers the ivory-handled revolver which the Soft-Handed thrust into his face.

"Come! I know you," remarked Marcia with a smile. "I was not looking for you, but you are welcome all the same. Come in, Black Burt. I believe we haven't met since old times."

He knew not what to say nor how to meet the cool creature who had stolen a deadly march on him.

But he went forward, for the menace of the weapon was enough, and when he had crossed the step Marcia waved the other hand to a chair and commanded him to be seated.

"You'll shoot if I don't sit down, won't you?" he grinned.

"I don't know. There is no telling what I will do if you are inclined to be ugly."

He took the chair, but all the time watched the hand at the revolver and saw the eyes that flashed behind it with the unmistakable light of victory.

"You have come to carry out the orders of your master, haven't you?" asked Marcia. "When did the black ball drop for me?"

"It hasn't dropped for you," blustered Black Burt. "I am here of my own accord."

"Turn your face to the light, please," said Marcia. "There, that will do. The whip left a scar or two. I didn't think I struck so hard that night. I didn't intend to do it, Black Burt. It was your fault. You wanted to sink the cords into my very flesh and you did so because you desired to show the man at the head of the League how loyal you were."

He did not reply for a moment.

"I have told the truth, Marcia," he observed.

"I came here of my own volition."

"To pay me back to-night for the three blows you received then?"

He reddened a little.

"What become of Marble Mark?"

"I can't tell you."

"And your master—Diamond Duke?"

He shook his head.

"Which one entered the house that night, Black Burt? Which one of you went to the avenue and saw Major Marmaduke alive for the last time?"

"That is for your friend, the ferret, to find out."

"Do you think he will fail?" she cried. "Do you sit there and boast that he will not get to the end of this dark mystery?"

"He is the coolest-headed man I have ever fought."

"Does the Man from Montana think so, too?"

"He does."

"You are armed, Black Burt. Lay your revolvers on the table."

He seemed to hesitate.

"I will count three. You know that you came hither to carry out on me the vengeance of the Black Tie. I am still Marcia. I am yet in the game and if you refuse to disarm at my command, the Tie will surely lose one of its best men."

Sullenly Black Burt reached back and disarmed himself and Marcia saw a revolver placed on the table.

"Now, good-night," she went on. "We may meet again; but it will be when the dragnet of this man-hunter of the East catches the sharks of the Silver Hills. You may go."

He sat like a person in a maze.

Dismissed and sent off by the woman he had come to throttle? He bit his lips through with-out effort.

"Go!" cried Marcia, rising. "There is time enough for you to escape it. You are the man who gave my husband, the Third Nabob, burial after the touching. You were as tender to him dead as a child or a woman would have been. That tenderness has saved your life. Go!"

She crossed the room, still holding the revolver in her hand. She held open the door and looking at her, he passed out and went down the stairs to stand face to face no more in this life with Marcia, the Soft-Handed.

Black Burt went direct to the rendezvous chosen between himself and Marble Mark.

He walked into the shadows of the spot and found no one.

"I will go alone. Heavens! to think that Marcia could have killed me, yet would not! I had forgotten about the burial of the Third Nabob, her husband."

He waited another hour, but no one came.

Had Marble Mark gone off without him? Had the executioner of the Black Tie changed his mind and gone back to the work of the League?

Black Burt grew tired of waiting and at last started off. He threaded the streets toward the ferry. He looked over his shoulder every now and then, but saw no one who looked like a tracker.

Hours had passed since his resolve to quit the service of the Black Tie and he heard the clocks striking eleven in several towers.

All at once Black Burt stopped and looked with all eyes at a man who stood near the ferry. The hat was pulled over a dark brow and he watched this person a moment before he moved.

"Always on the track! This man has picked up every link in the chain. There is not one which he has not found. Talk about beating a man like that!" and when the figure moved again the member of the Mountain League turned toward the river with a desperate motion and seemed to calculate how many bounds would take him to the waves.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MAN IN THE MASK.

THE terror inspired by Diamond Duke's visit to Portia lingered long after that cool-head had taken his departure.

The Nabob's heiress waited until she had heard the last step on the steps before she moved and then she stood up with pallid face and glareful eyes.

What, that man make her his wife?

His cool threat still rung in her ears and she wondered how he knew so much. He had told her how she had descended the staircase that dark night and how she had opened the door of the library, to steal back, later on, and retire, perhaps with a crime on her soul.

A good deal had not been told, but had been hinted at by Captain Duke. Portia knew what he had omitted; she was aware that he was playing a great hand for herself and the millions of Laban Joyce. There was no question of his intentions, and she thought of a thousand-and-one things while she stood near the door and waited until she no longer heard the feet of the man who had come to her like the shadow of death.

What should she do?

He had promised to come back. The promise was a threat, as well, and she shuddered when she thought that she might be compelled to see him win the game despite her resolve never to desert Gerald Green, her betrothed.

Portia, with a look which showed resolution, and with hands that sunk their white nails into her palms when she looked ahead, and seemed to see the final victory of this man, left the house.

"I told him not to interfere. I have warned him that he must expect to be baffled by me if he persisted in fighting out this mystery; but now I am going to him, not so much for my sake as for Gerald's. I will find this man-hunter. I will tell him all I know, and he must fight this cool devil for me."

Portia was going to the very man she had antagonized.

Once on the street she hurried off and turned up late that night on the staircase leading to the den of Hiram Hercules, the ferret.

She was in the shadow of a new peril. She had been faced by Diamond Duke, whom she had never seen before; she had been menaced by the head of the Black Tie, though she knew him not by that distinctive title.

She almost turned back when she thought of what she had said at different times to Hiram Hercules, and now she was actually going to him.

A light was seen beyond the detective's door.

Portia rapped lightly and waited with excitement unallayed.

A step came toward the portal, and the door was opened.

The Nabob's heiress rushed into the room, and stopped when she caught the eye that met hers.

The ferret of the trail was cool and collected.

She was the last person he expected there at that hour, and was wondering what brought her thither.

Had Gerald Green sent her?

"I have come to you at last!" cried Portia, taking a chair. "I have come to be rescued from the toils in which I find myself. I may have gone to the library that night. I may have found him there; but, as I live, Captain Hercules, I did not kill him!"

The detective looked across the space that separated them, and seemed to smile.

"You don't believe me. I thought you would not," continued the beautiful woman. "I might have known this before I came. You men are merciless, and seldom surrender your first theories."

She rose and stood before him. He saw her eyes fastened upon him, and for a moment he studied the marble face, tensely drawn, and seamed with suffering.

"I have never believed you guilty," he said at last, still watching her. "From the very first I have believed you the victim of a scheme. You went down to the library that night, but you committed no crime."

"Thank God!"

"You did not know the secret of the Black Tie. You never saw until you found Laban Joyce dead in his chair, the mark of the Mountain League."

"Before Heaven! I never did."

Then Portia proceeded and detailed the visit of Diamond Duke; she gave it in her own graphic words and the detective listened until the last sentence had been spoken.

"Not long ago I would have offered you my wealth to have stepped from this trail, but now all I own is yours if you break the power of this conspiracy and bring to light the person who murdered my father."

Did the detective start? When she called Major Marmaduke her parent did a singular light leap up in his eyes and remain there a moment?

"I am doing this now," remarked Hiram. "I am still on this same trail. But answer me one question! What became of the very private papers which Laban Joyce must have left behind?"

"I have never been able to find them."
 "Have you looked for them?"
 "I have looked everywhere."
 "What became of the will?"
 "There was no will."
 "Did he ever tell you that he had made one?"
 "He hinted at a will, but I have never seen it."

"There are private papers. Will you let me look for them?"
 "The entire house is at your service."
 "Now?"
 "At any time."

Just an hour later a man crossed the threshold of Laban Joyce's library and shut the door. It was Hiram Hercules, the ferret, and he locked the door behind him.

No one was in the room with the detective. He advanced to the table and looked into the drawers one by one, opening them with keys which Portia had left in his care.

In a room overhead, waiting the result of the ferret's investigations, sat the white-faced woman who had been confronted by Diamond Duke of the Black Tie.

Now and then she heard the ferret moving about in the library, but she did not descend to see what he was doing.

All at once Hiram Hercules, striking the wall nearest the table, fell back with a slight exclamation of wonder, for a little door had opened there and he was gazing into a niche which seemed empty.

Presently he ran his hand into the opening and pulled out some papers carefully tied.

He looked round the room when he did this and then bore his find to the table.

In another moment he was seated there looking over the papers and laying aside page after page when he had read it.

Slowly the door which he had locked opened without noise.

The key if it had turned in that lock had done so without the semblance of a sound and the eyes that watched the man-hunter were dark full of crime.

A velvet mask fitted the upper part of the face which leaned across the threshold.

The foot thrust forward made no sound on the carpet and then another followed it.

Step by step the shadow came on.

Hiram Hercules saw nothing of this silent figure which advanced with the certainty of doom. He saw nothing but the writing on the pages which he had taken from the hole in the wall.

The thick carpet should have betrayed the detective's enemy, but it would not. The light might have thrown his shadow across the table, but it threw nothing there.

Suddenly the figure bent forward and looked over Hiram Hercules's shoulder.

The black mask revealed nothing of that face which was white and threatening.

The hands were gloved, but they had the symmetry of a woman's hand, and the eyes that blazed behind the mask had murder in their dark shades.

There came down the staircase at this juncture a woman whose look was eagerness and anxiety commingled.

Portia had waited nearly an hour for the detective's report.

She could wait no longer.

"This is the slow torture of death!" she exclaimed. "I must know what he has found, if anything. I must see what this man-hunter has discovered in the library."

She came to the door of the library and opened it.

The next instant she seemed frozen with terror by the sight she saw.

A man—a man in a mask, was leaning over Hiram Hercules at the table.

Portia's eyes drank in everything at a glance. She seemed to see the whole tableau of murder as it had been enacted before in that very room.

The masked slayer stood over the detective with his hands raised almost above his head, and in them was something which looked like a black noose or a serpent ready to twist its bellish folds about the victim's neck.

Portia bounded forward and uttered a wild shriek.

She reached the table, but was thrown back by superhuman power.

The hidden face had turned upon her. He wheeled with the quickness of a lightning bolt and Portia saw him for a blinding moment, for a dazzling light seemed to leap from the center of the mask and she was hurled back to the wall.

Hiram Hercules, dropping the papers, sprang up and ran toward the girl for he did not see the man.

He caught Portia and was holding her swooning figure in his grasp when he felt something brush past him.

It was the work of an instant.

"The man! The black mask!" cried the Nabob's heiress.

It was too late now. Hiram, the ferret, looked but saw nothing.

He carried Portia to the arm-chair at the table and then looked for the papers he had been reading.

"My God! they are gone!"
 Portia, who heard his cry, gave him a look he will never forget.

"You did not see him! He was bending over you with the Black Tie in his hands. I saw him when I opened the door. I sprang forward with a cry, but was thrown against the wall. What did he take? Have you found anything?"

The Broadway Sifter smiled despite the situation.

"Quick! into the hall! He may be in the house yet!" cried the young girl.

Hiram was in the hall before she had finished. But the front door was locked on the inside, and the masked man had vanished as if a wall had opened and taken him in.

CHAPTER XXXII. A VERY BRIEF TRIUMPH.

HIRAM HERCULES, nonplused for a moment, looked at the Nabob's heiress and wondered if, after all, she had not been the victim of some strange disease.

But Portia persisted in saying that she had seen a man in the house, and the sudden disappearance of the papers told him that some one had carried them off.

But the longer he looked the deeper seemed to grow the mystery of the theft, and when he left the house, which he did not do until after a thorough search of every apartment, he was convinced that the documents had fallen into the hands of the Black Tie.

It was midnight when Hiram Hercules, turning up in another part of the city, fell to watching a house from which at last he saw a muffled figure emerge and move off toward the river.

"Not for all that is at stake in this game must I lose her now," he muttered. "This woman hunted so long must not escape. Whither is she going? What trail is Amie, the Cactus Belle, on at this hour?"

If he was following Amie, Diamond Duke's sister, she did not seem to realize that she was watched.

He had promised Gerald Green that he would find the French teacher and he had been as good as his word. Nothing but a fear that she might escape him forced him to keep her track with the tenacity of a bloodhound.

He wondered whither Amie was going at that hour. If she had not come out of the house she had lately left, he would have invaded it and confronted her, but she was sparing him this work.

Nearer and nearer the river pressed the Cactus Belle.

She passed on to the ferry-house and there fell to watching the people who came down to take the late boat.

It was while watching her that he saw her start when a man came forward.

Black Burt, bent on escape after his unsuccessful visit to Marcia, the Soft-Handed, had entered the ferry-house, and Amie, recognizing him with a slight cry, had shrunk among the shadows and was regarding him with strange eagerness.

Suddenly Black Burt who had changed his mind while he watched Hiram Hercules, turned and went back.

Amie watched his departure with a smile of pleasure.

The ferret did not follow the member of the Black Tie, but turned again to Amie.

The girl should not escape him.

For some time Amie stood where she had stopped, waiting for the departure of the boat and now and then glancing at the people who came one by one into the ferry-house.

She came out of the room at last.

She stopped to draw her shawl around her and was in the act of touching the plank, when a hand touched her.

She fell back from that touch as if she had come in contact with an electric wire.

Caught!

She seemed to realize everything in a flash.

The face of Hiram Hercules looked down upon her and his grip was at her wrist.

"I will go. I have been watching for you all this time," she said, smiling. "I don't know how you discovered me, but you are here. Did you see Black Burt?"

"I saw him," answered the ferret. "We will go back."

Amie went with him without trouble.

There was a strange calmness about the woman that riveted the detective's gaze upon her.

"They don't escape you, do they?" she asked. "It is impossible. But you have had the skein in your hands all the time, Captain Hercules, as they call you."

They went out and the detective called a cab. They alighted on Broadway and he led Amie up to his office.

She had been there before. She had gone to that very door, but had gone back without telling anything. Now she was in the grip of the man of clues, and he was watching her out of eyes that let nothing escape them.

Hiram Hercules had locked the door and she could not get away.

Indeed, from the way she sat in the chair which she had taken she had no desire to escape.

For some moments there were no words be-

tween them and then the Broadway Sifter said:

"Are you ready to tell all now?"

Amie seemed to start.

"To tell you all?" she answered. "No, I am not."

It was a disappointment to the man of many trails. He had been led, from the circumstances of her capture at the ferry, to believe that she was ready to give him the last link in the chain.

"Then, I won't ask for all," he replied. "I will take but little; but I want to know of the secret entrances to the library of Laban Joyce's house."

Amie showed her teeth in a smile.

"Do you know that they exist?" she asked. "Are you sure there are such things in that house?"

"I am."

He recalled the last adventure there, the story Portia told of the masked man bending over his chair with the Black Tie poised above his head.

"If I tell you here I will have to tell the same story before a tribunal, won't I?"

"Not necessarily so."

"But you make no pledges, Captain Hercules. You are as shrewd as the shrewdest. I know you!"

She looked away, but the detective soon brought her back to the matter in hand.

"You have played two roles to perfection, woman," he remarked, looking her straight in the face. "You have successfully been the Cactus Belle and the spy of the Black Tie in New York."

Not a word from the listener.

"You are at the end of the string. I admire a cool woman, one who plays a cool hand, no matter what that hand is. You have played spy for the Black Tie. You know all about the secret doors of Major Marmaduke's last home. You know the trail that led the Black Tie to the last of the Nabobs. You helped them bind the cord around his throat. You were in the house that night. The clock never struck two because it could not."

"I admire your cleverness," smiled Amie, without a particle of her calmness suffering. "In the West you would have been made Marshall of Sundown, or the head of the Vigilantes Tribunal. Here you are detective—a raveler of conspiracies, a tracker of men and women."

"I have been compelled to hunt you because of what you know and did that night. You went to Portia's home for a purpose. You obeyed the command of the Black Tie. Your work was done when the last Nabob died."

Amie for the first time seemed to hope, but the look which spoke of this vanished when the ferret spoke again.

"I have you wound up in the coil," he went on. "There is to be a day of reckoning. Do you know what has happened?"

She said nothing, though he had stopped to let her speak again.

"Portia has been found innocent. The net of the Black Tie did not catch her. But she is to become a bride. Not only this, but she will probably lose some of her wealth."

"I know that. I foresaw that all along," cried Amie forgetting herself. "The private papers hidden in the wall—"

"You have seen them, then?"

She seemed to shrink within herself.

"You knew they were there," continued the detective. "You have watched Laban Joyce when he thought he was unwatched."

Her look was triumph itself.

"Never mind what you saw in that house previous to the night of the murder. You were on guard; you knew it was coming. You knew that Diamond Duke—"

Amie threw out one hand and let it fall upon the table where it rested white and faultless.

"I refuse!" she cried. "I refuse to tell you a solitary thing. Take me before a court of law and I will seal my lips even in the shadows of the gallows you men erect for people. I refuse!"

She settled back in her chair defiant and silent. There was a look in her eye which told Hiram Hercules what sort of woman he was dealing with, and for half a minute he watched her without another word.

"Very well," he observed at last. "It shall be as you say. You know all. You are one of the witnesses, but not the only one. You know who came to the house that night. When you told me in the library that you saw Portia come out of her room and descend the staircase when you saw her come back and re-enter her own chamber, you knew that you were only carrying out the command of the Black Tie. You know that Sandy Silas, the Shoemaker from Sundown, refrained from joining the Order in the West because he would not sanction its work on the Nabobs. You know that the hand which that night in this city took the life of Major Marmaduke was the hand which in years gone by you kissed in girlish glee in another part of the world—"

"Stop!" cried Amie. "You have gone far enough. You have picked up every link. Man, you have no heart. You are like all your class. Hunting men has calloused your feelings. You

make me condemn one who has had the only love I ever bestowed upon man. I will not betray him!"

Hiram said nothing.

"You can't end this trail successfully without me," she went on. "You know that without me success will never land you at the goal."

She sprang up and ran to the door.

Her hand, clutching the key that remained in the lock, seemed to wrench it, but the ferret sat still and smiled.

He thought he had this crafty girl still in his power.

"Without me you fail!" she repeated, her eyes sending across the apartment a flash which he easily understood. "I will never betray the Black Tie now, though at one time I came to your door with treason in my heart. I have turned my back forever upon the League, but I will not unseal my lips to send you to your long anticipated triumph. Captain Hercules, we may meet again, but it will be when you are baffled and when Amie the Cactus Belle is beyond your grip!"

The key turned. The door, much to the detective's surprise, was jerked open and a woman's figure darted out.

"She knew she could do that!" cried Hiram, rushing toward the door. "She was sure of evading me when she took in the door and her own environment."

He was on the staircase when he saw a figure flit into the street below.

He went down to the sidewalk, three steps at a bound. He landed in the light like a man fired from a cannon; he looked in every direction; but the girl was gone.

The key to the Nabob Mystery had slipped through his fingers!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CATCHING A TARTAR.

AMIE, flying from the detective, thought only of escape.

She did not care to fall back into the clutches of the tireless shadow of the metropolis, for she knew something of his cunning, and how near he was to the solution of the dark mystery of the ninth Nabob.

She turned up in her old quarter, and sought out the little room in which she had buried herself, hoping there to hide until the storm had blown over.

But for her it was never to cease. It was destined to blow until the guilty had been unearthed, and the hand of justice had clutched the wrist of the slayer.

Meantime another character of our romance was playing a hand which, if successful, would put another ending to the game.

Diamond Duke, the Man from Montana, had not forgotten the robbery of the steel safe. He knew that the papers which he had taken from the red package so dear to Dot, the child of Feathers, had been stolen from him, and though he cursed himself for not destroying them when he found them in his hand, he resolved to retake them if possible.

The cleverness of this cool head had figured out the thief. He felt that the man the League was fighting had swooped down upon the Black Tie's nest and despoiled it. He had learned that Marble Mark had failed again, or at least he knew that Hiram Hercules was still living, and this fact was against the final success of the play.

Diamond Duke was no longer in the sumptuous room where he had planned some of the strokes of the Black Tie.

He recalled his last interview with Amie, wherein the girl had promised to locate Dot for him, and instead of waiting for her to come to him with her information, he went out and sought the room where he knew the Cactus Belle was in hiding.

And this woman was his sister!

They had been thrown early on their own resources, and, drifting to the far Southwest, had become characters in the building up of Sundown, and in the subsequent events, the shadows or echoes of which we have only glanced at, or heard at a distance.

"I will finish this ferret yet!" he cried, pushing down the street. "Let me find where Dot is and then I will turn on Hiram Hercules and play the whole game out. After that there will be a wedding if I want one, and the work of the Black Tie will have been done."

Diamond Duke stood in the shadow of the house where he knew Amie had taken refuge.

He knew nothing of her capture by Hiram Hercules, and nothing, of course, of her escape.

While he watched the house there came down the sidewalk a figure which attracted him as it came up.

"The Soft-Handed!" exclaimed the Man from Montana. "Amie fears this woman. She says that she and the ferret are in league, and it looks that way. What is she looking for the Cactus Belle, too? How came she to discover that Amie lives here?"

Marcia, slightly disguised, but not enough for the keen eyes of Diamond Duke, stopped in front of the house and then approached the door.

The Man from Montana saw her open the portal, which was not locked, and let herself in.

"Now's my time; I have longed to meet once more, face to face, this woman who, among the Silver Hills, gave us as much trouble as the Nabobs. She is in my hands at last. I have found Marcia and if Amie will not interfere, she shall see the final vengeance of the Black Tie."

He followed Marcia to the door and let himself in after her.

In another instant he stood in the darkened hall and heard a door somewhere overhead open and shut.

Diamond Duke went up-stairs.

He did not know that only a short time previous, in another quarter of the city, Black Burt had faced this same woman, to meet a revolver, and to be spared because his rough hands once buried the third Nabob of Sundown.

The Man from Montana stopped at a door in front of him and looked at it with eager eyes. He heard some one moving in the room, and when he went forward again he was stopped suddenly by the appearance of a female figure, and Marcia stood before him!

The coming out was startling enough to thrill Diamond Duke and he recoiled.

"What, you here?" cried the Soft-Handed, glaring at him and then smiling. "Well, we had to meet some time. Why not here?"

The head of the League said nothing. His gaze was riveted upon the handsome but white face before him, and he wondered what would be the next move of his old enemy.

"I did not find Amie, the Cactus Belle, at home, but you will do just as well," continued Marcia. "We are enemies, enemies to the death! Diamond Duke, do you know that the game is about played out?"

He laughed.

"You said that once, thousands of miles from here," he remarked. "I heard your voice that night when the bridge across the underground river in the Uncrowned Angel went down, and you stood on the bank and laughed at the cries that greeted the fall. About played out, is it? You are right, woman. The game is nearly through and you are not on the top wave."

"Never mind that. The shadow of the detective who has picked up link by link the chain of guilt is over you. Your last plot has failed; your executioner has abandoned the game and ere this has placed a long distance between him and the halter."

Diamond Duke affected not to hear the last words. He bent forward and caught the true gleam that lit up the eyes by which he was regarded.

"New York is not Sundown. The last Nabob is dead, but the avenger is at the heel of the Black Tie."

"Enough of this! Woman, you came back from that ride across the Cactus Desert, but you will take another from which there is no return. The hand of the Black Tie has lost none of its cunning and you are now to feel it for the last time."

Marcia did not move, only her hand went up from among the folds of her garment and something glittered at the ends of her fingers.

Diamond Duke saw it and advanced.

"We are alone," he said. "We are the only occupants of this house. Amie is out somewhere and she will not return until you have crossed the divide and joined the Nine Nabobs on the other side."

With the coolness of an executioner and without pity he advanced, and Marcia, standing at the table with the uplifted dagger in her hand, saw him take step after step on the yielding carpet.

It was like the crawl of a tiger just before the spring.

All at once with a sudden leap the Man from Montana went at the Soft-Handed.

Down came the glittering blade to be caught in mid-air, and the next moment Diamond Duke was holding Marcia in his velvet grip and was looking at her with the victorious eyes of a thug.

She never quavered.

"What became of the papers?" he asked.

"Find them!"

"Where is Dot, the child of Feathers?"

"Dot is not the child of Feathers, and you know it now."

"Woman, you know too much. You have aided the man-hunter. All through the game I have seen your hand. You have been on our trail ever since we transferred the scene of the Black Tie's operations to New York."

"I have. Not one of your plays has escaped me. I was a little too late to save the last of the Nabobs, for despite my hatred for him, I would have saved his life. Where is Dot, eh? Go out and find her. The red package is no longer in your hands, Diamond Duke. The girl will soon know all. You know how Feathers died—the only one who did not fall by the hand of the Black Tie. Your executioner thought he could vary the programme that night, and Feathers got the knife instead of the dark cravat. No, I am not afraid of you. I have met you before and in Sundown I fought and nearly baffled you. It was my hand that cut the moorings of the bridge in the mine that night—my hand that sent it down the stygian

stream, bearing to doom, as I thought, you and Amie the Cactus Belle."

He looked, but made no reply.

"The clock is striking an hour. When it is through you will never hear it strike again."

"Do you hope to escape the final unmasking? Do you think that you will baffle this man-hunter. Remember! this is not Sundown of the Silver Hills, Diamond Duke."

Marcia was pushed to a chair and falling into it, she looked up into the eyes of the man who stood over her.

"Come! We will go to another place."

These words from Diamond Duke at that moment startled her.

Whither would he take her?

But she would not refuse. To remain in that place and perish was not to her liking.

Watching his captive like a hawk, Diamond Duke went down the steps and out upon the streets. He knew what he had to expect of the crafty creature he had netted.

A few minutes later he stopped in front of another house at which Marcia looked with a smile. She knew the place; she had watched its door before; she had crept down that same street at the dead of night, knowing that the Black Tie, the Order transplanted from the Silver Hills to Gotham, was holding its dark sessions there as it had held them in the mines in the days of the Nine Nabobs. And now she was entering its doors, the captive of the master spirit of the plot!

Marcia said nothing while Diamond Duke unlocked the door and let them in.

Her glance was a look of defiance if not of absolute scorn.

They passed through the hall to the door at the end of it.

Down to the chamber of the Black Tie went the pair.

As the door shut behind them and Diamond Duke struck a light which revealed the interior of the place, Marcia, with the quickness of the tigress, sprang at her conductor and forced him against the nearest wall.

It was all done in a moment. The man, staggering back, gasped for breath as the velvety fingers of his enemy sunk into his throat and he found himself against the stones unable despite his strength to successfully struggle against this mad woman.

"Not for you are these hands!" she cried. "I leave you to the man of the trail. I leave you to the man-hunter of Gotham. You have played the game out. You have thrown the Black Tie about the throat of the last Nabob and over the head of the last victim. Diamond Duke, you will keep this place till the destroyer comes."

She turned away with the eyes of the Man from Montana almost starting from his head. She looked back to him as he leaned against the wall, gazing at her flitting figure, and when she gained the door he saw the flash that gleamed under her sweeping lashes.

Shut up in the chamber of his own creating!

Diamond Duke watched the door as it swung shut and heard the lock click with the key left on the outside.

He had looked for nothing of this kind. He did not expect to be shut up in the prison of the Black Tie.

Marcia ran up the steps and then down through the corridor to the door.

Diamond Duke turned to the door in the wall, the one which opened into the tunnel leading to the pier and the same one down which we have seen him conduct Amie the Cactus Belle.

"She thought to coop me up here till the detective comes," he laughed. "But she knew nothing of this. She was not aware that this way leads to freedom and to the end of the trail of the Black Tie."

He had opened the door in the wall and with the dank air of the river on his face was looking at the lights that danced on the stream.

His eyes seemed to blaze. He would baffle the enemy of the Black Tie. Marcia, the Soft-Handed, should not score a victory against him and see the cause he had championed fail at last.

He rushed into the place and was pushing toward the river when he stopped and drew back. Something lay at his feet.

"Gods!" cried the Man from Montana, stooping and then starting up with another exclamation. "It is Amie!"

The light that flickered in his hand for a moment told him that they had made no mistake. He was looking down into the face of the Cactus Belle, and when he picked her up and went back toward the chamber of the League, he heard a groan which told him that the key to the Nabob Mystery was still alive.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE SIFTER KEEPS HIS PROMISE.

DIAMOND DUKE had found Amie in the nick of time.

The Cactus Belle, after her interview with Hiram Hercules, the city shadower, had sought the corridor of the Black Tie's chamber for the last time and with a desperate purpose uppermost in her heart.

She knew the resolution which animated the

detective's bosom. She knew that he would stick to the Nabob until success crowned his efforts.

She might escape for a time if she hid again, but he would find her; he would drag her before the courts and then she would be compelled to give up the secret she had held so long and to tell how, entering the Nabob's house as the spy of the Black Tie, she had served it well, to pass out of it after the death of the Ninth Man and to accuse Portia of committing the crime.

Diamond Duke saw Amie, who had been overpowered by the noxious odors of the underground tunnel, come slowly back to life.

"They will find us all!" she cried. "It is too late now to beat this cool-head. Hiram Hercules has had me in his power, but I have escaped. I refused to tell him what I knew, but he will find us all, I say."

"You were going to the river, girl?"

Amie made no attempt to avoid his gaze.

"Why not? The secret would be safe there and there only. They will drag me before the tribunals now. They will make me tell who came to the mansion of the Nabob that night."

The lifting of Diamond Duke's fingers broke her sentence.

"They will make you tell nothing if you are not a traitress at heart!" he cried.

Amie shuddered.

"Then, let me go to the river," she exclaimed, breaking from his grasp. "I am Amie no longer, but again I am the Cactus Belle. I don't care to be in at the death."

She started across the room, but the hand of Man from Montana arrested her.

"Not yet!" sternly said Diamond Duke.

"What, do you hope to win at this juncture?"

"Never have I been baffled yet!"

"But you have never had Hiram Hercules against you."

It was true. The Black Tie had never had Hiram Hercules against it.

An hour after the events that took place in the chamber of the Tie a man stood looking into the face of the woman who had been seized on the street while flitting round a corner where the shadows were thick and he was waiting for her to speak.

In the same room and not far away sat another woman who was looking at the detective with a smile of triumph in her eyes.

Marcia and Hiram Hercules were watching Amie who had fallen back into the ferret's clutches after her interview with Diamond Duke and now the Cactus Belle in the presence of her old enemy was silent while the two waited for her to answer a question which the detective had put.

"My lips are sealed as to the occurrences of that night," she said at last. "I betray no one."

Marcia made a move which the girl caught. She turned full upon the Soft-Handed.

"Ask that woman for another secret!" she cried.

Marcia was seen to shudder.

"Ask her, I say," continued Amie. "She wasn't in the house of the Nabob that night. She was not there, I tell you, but you have asked me what I knew about Dot. That woman is the girl's mother!"

Marcia recoiled and looked at Hiram Hercules.

"I don't know what the red package told you, but I am telling the truth. You have asked me nothing about this, but I am volunteering the information. Marcia the Soft-Handed was the wife of the third Nabob when he fell by the hands of the Black Tie. But she had a previous history. She was a wife before she married the third Nabob. She thought her first husband dead and the child which she had given him she had placed in other hands to be raised. Did Feathers's confession tell you this, Hiram Hercules?"

The detective made no reply.

"When she came to Sundown with the third Nabob and saw him perish by the Black Tie, she thought, perhaps, of taking another husband from the next victims who came one by one. But you see how fast they fell by the hand of the Secret Order. One by one they went down and one by one were swept from the path of the Black Tie. Then the last one came. Then Major Marmaduke entered the field and was, to some extent, victorious. He was the last of the nine brothers, all of whom became the Nabobs of Sundown. Yes, they were brothers. Marcia knows that. She recoiled from the last one when he came for she had believed him dead. She saw in him her first husband and Dot's father. She would have fled, but perhaps the old love came back, or the old hate—which was it?"

Amie turned to Marcia who had not lost a syllable of this strange narrative but there was no reply.

"Did Feathers tell you this in the red package, Hiram Hercules?" smiled Amie as she continued. "Well, it is true. But with the coming of Major Marmaduke Marcia heard another story. She knew that after the separation and through

the aid of a divorce the last Nabob had found another wife, but until she drifted to this city years afterward, she was ignorant of Portia's coming into the world. You know now who Dot is."

Marcia, until this moment silent but white, sprang across the room and would have seized Amie if the hand of the detective had not come between.

For a moment the two women gazed at one another and then the desperado's sister stood erect.

"I am your prisoner, Hiram Hercules, but you know nothing yet of the death of the last Nabob."

"I know enough," was the quick response. "I know who came into the mansion that night and who went to the library, sent thither by the fall of the black ball on the chamber lower than the streets of New York."

Amie seemed to shiver as she watched the keen eyes of the city shadow.

"I never told you," she cried.

"No, you have not betrayed the guilty. You would not tell me, but I have found out. The trail is mine!"

Marcia sent out her hand and Amie, turning, felt the velvet grip at her wrist.

"Woman, this is not Sundown. You need not betray the Man from Montana. You need not say that you opened the door to him that night. You need not tell how Portia came down the stairs in a dream-trance and how she went back with bloodless hands and with no crime on her soul. It is all told."

The look that passed between the two women was enough, and when Hiram Hercules saw it he stepped to where Amie had fallen back upon the chair and watched her.

"The end of the trail, is it?" she cried, looking up into the ferret's face. "It may be, but Diamond Duke is still the head of the Black Tie."

In a small chamber which was well furnished stood a man who seemed to be taking a final survey of the place.

Tall and handsome, with the blackest of eyes and with a figure which combined the perfectness of an Apollo's and the strength of a giant's, he looked about the room and at last turned down the light.

"The game is played out," he said. "The Black Tie is no more. I have given up the fight because I have accomplished the original purposes of the Order. The Nine Nabobs have been hunted down; the old feud is settled and, deserted by the two traitors, Black Burt and Marble Mark, I turn my back upon the last play of the League. I won't push my game with Portia. I will let her severely alone. It was not so much a game for money as it was a dash for vengeance. I would have been Nabob of Sundown but for the nine brothers who came and ruled with a rod of iron until, one by one, they went down over the trail that led to the mountain dead-house and never came back. Let the detective who has fought out the case of the ninth Nabob have a barren victory. He and Marcia will have nothing to share between them except some of Major Marmaduke's money and that will do them no good. The sting of defeat will rankle in the ferret's breast and he will never boast again that the guilty always falls into his power."

Diamond Duke, the speaker, walked to the door, and stopping there, took a final survey of the apartment.

His eyes were bright; he looked at the steel safe, which had held more than one secret, and seemed to smile. It had yielded up to Hiram Hercules the red package which would have told Dot so much, and which had given him a new clew to a woman's life.

The Man from Montana looked no longer like the man who had directed the hand of the Black Tie in Sundown.

Though some of his good looks remained, he was not the handsome sport of the Southwest, and when he shut the door he stood for a moment in the hallway and adjusted his gloves.

Then out into the night. Down the street toward the secret chamber of the Black Tie.

He crossed the threshold and went alone down the steps leading to the "Castle."

The dais and the black ball were there.

As he turned on the light the ball moved, and fell to the foot of the staff with a dull sound.

Was it an omen of evil?

The Man from Montana stopped.

The next moment something stepped into the light. He saw the hand that went up; he saw the face that looked into his own. He fell back and his hand swept, lightning-like, toward his hip, but it was too late.

The revolver of Hiram Hercules covered him.

It was the right place to meet for the last time the Man from Montana. It was the proper place in which to terminate the game of the last Nabob.

As the detective advanced, another door opened and the figure of Marcia stood on the stone floor.

"The ending of the game would not be complete without you!" was all that Diamond Duke said as he glared at the Soft-Handed, who looked

at him without a word, but with eyes that told him much.

All was over.

Link by link the great detective had forged the chain about the guilty.

Not only this, but by his efforts the true history of Dot had been revealed, showing that she was Marcia's child and Portia's half-sister.

The waif came out from the detective's sister's home and was received into the arms of the Soft-Handed.

Feathers who had played the role of a father had played it well; but there was no longer need of such playing, for the game was at an end and the shadow of the noose was over the right man.

Amie never unsealed her lips when it came to telling who had taken the life of Major Marmaduke alias Laban Joyce, the millionaire.

But, there was one who stood up and told. This was Diamond Duke, the Man from Montana, and the story that fell from his lips was so startling in its nature that the city stood aghast.

Until then it knew nothing of the terrible feud of Sundown, nothing of Captain Hiram Hercules's trail and adventures after the right man.

The Strong-Arm Detective watched the Man from Montana while he talked, telling how he entered the millionaire's house and threw over the Nabob's head the dread Black Tie; how Amie had let him in, and how she had tried to fasten the terrible crime upon Portia, who, in time, became the wife of her faithful lover, Gerald Green.

And justice, thanks to the tireless detective, got her own.

There came a time when Dot became a bride herself, marrying the young reporter, Ray Morton, and Portia gladly divided with her her father's great wealth.

Marcia, the Soft-Handed, vanished from the stage of active life, and to-day is found with Dot's children.

Black Burt and Marble Mark never turned up; they doubtless drifted back to the wild Southwest, where they died "with their boots on," and Hiram Hercules, the Strong-Arm Detective—the master of the trail—still hunts missing links, and always completes the chain he starts out to forge for the guilty.

With the Black Tie no more and the last Nabob avenged, we leave the greatest trail of a great crime-sifter's life.

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